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ALLEN

UNDER SEALED ORDERS

A Novel

BY

GRANT ALLEN

AUTHOR OF

'THE TENTS OF SHEM,' 'THE DUCHESS OF POWYSLAND,'

'THE SCALLYWAG,' ETC.

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UNDER SEALED ORDERS

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A STRANGE SUGGESTION.

It was almost dusk when Owen reached Benlade, the countrified little Oxfordshire station on the Great Western line where he was to meet Mr. Hayward. He had telegraphed on by what train he was coming, and as he descended from the carriage, somewhat chilled from his ride, a familiar hand pressed his shoulder kindly.

'Hullo, there you are!' Mr. Hayward said, trying to grasp his right hand. 'Well,

I'm glad, at any rate, you came on at once. It's something to see still, my boy, you can at least obey orders !'

He spoke gravely, but affectionately, with a tender ring in his silvery voice. Owen blushed for pure shame as he thought at that moment of his gross disobedience in saying good-bye to Ionê. He held out his left hand somewhat awkwardly in return, for the right was bandaged.

'Why, what's this?' Mr. Hayward asked, looking down at it in surprise.

And Owen answered, not without a pang of regret at having to acknowledge so much levity at so grave a moment :

'Well, I had a slight accident with it at Moor Hill a couple of days ago. The fact is, I saw a gate by the roadside that wanted vaulting badly. It looked as good as new, though a trifle moss-grown. I touched it—just so—and the minute it felt my weight—hi presto !—every bar of it came apart like

magic, and down it tumbled, a bundle of sticks, with me in the midst of them. It reminded me of the deacon's one-horse shay. I crushed my hand and arm a bit just trying to save myself; but that's all. It's nothing. It'll be right in a day or two.'

Mr. Hayward glanced back at him with a strange wistful look of mingled distress and admiration. He surveyed those splendid limbs, that vigorous young body, that eager, ardent face, oh, so sadly, so regretfully!

'Why, my boy,' he said with a bitter smile, 'how irrepressible you are! How uncrushable! The health and strength and youth in you *will* come out in spite of everything. What could ever have made me mistake such a lad as *you* for an instrument we could mould and model to our pattern? To think that even at such a depressing moment as this you had vitality enough left in you to vault the first five-barred gate you came to!'

'I was ashamed of it myself,' Owen answered penitently.

Mr. Hayward eyed him again, as they walked on towards the lodgings; a small boy toiling behind them, panting with the portmanteau.

'So much life and energy,' he said, ruefully surveying his ward with admiring pity from head to foot. 'So much force and beauty; so much vigour and impetus. What a pity it must be so! . . . But there's no other way out of it.'

He walked along in silence a few yards further. Then he began quietly, once more, in no unfriendly tone:

'I'm glad you crushed your hand, though, my boy; it may make things easier for us.'

Owen hadn't the faintest idea what Mr. Hayward was driving at, but he walked on by his friend's side without another word till they reached the lodgings. Then the

elder man led the way in through the leafless garden, pausing for a moment by the gate to remark upon the cold beauty of the wintry view—the long line of pollard willows by the river-bank; the bare elms just beyond, in the hedgerow by the brook; the slender twigs of the birches, silhouetted by myriads against the twilight sky.

'I've had a shot or two at them with the camera,' he said, 'in spite of frost and snow. In fact, I haven't let either weather or my accident interfere with my ordinary pursuits in any way. I've been out on the river every day since I came. Mr. Wilcox, my landlord here, keeps a canoe and a dingey, which he lets out for hire. I've tried them both, and I find it really a most enjoyable exercise these frosty mornings.'

'Seems to take his mind off, poor gentleman!' Mrs. Wilcox, the landlady, said to Owen confidentially, some minutes later, as she ushered him upstairs to his bedroom in

the little country inn, half tavern, half farm-house, overlooking the river. 'I'm glad you've come, sir, for he's badly in want o' summat to interest him and amuse him. He's a real nice gentleman, that's just what he is, and kindness itself to the children; and so thoughtful and that too! "Mrs. Wilcox," says he, when he come fust, "anythink 'll do for me; don't let me disturb your own arrangements in any way." But he've talked a sight about you, sir, and been looking forward to your coming from the very fust moment he ever arrived. "Ah, this'll do nicely for my young friend," says he, when he looks in at this very bedroom. He's main fond o' you, sir; one can see that with half a eye. Got neither chick nor child of his own, nor yet a wife no more, he tells me; so it ain't no wonder he should think such a lot of you.'

For Mr. Hayward's sake, in spite of his depression, Owen tried that evening to be as

cheerful as possible. He went down to dinner in the stiff little parlour—the usual bare room of the English country inn, with coloured lithographs of red-coated hunters in full cry after a prodigiously brush-tailed fox for its sole decorations—and he even ate what he could, though the mouthfuls choked him. Good, simple Mrs. Wilcox had done her best in honour of 'Mr. Hayward's young gentleman,' and was distressed to see her spring chicken despised, as she thought, and her mince-pies unappreciated. But Owen couldn't help it. Conversation languished till the coffee came in. Then Mr. Hayward turned round, drew his chair to the fire, and began talking to him—in Russian.

Owen knew what that meant at once. It was the seal of secrecy. He bent forward to listen. Mr. Hayward, paler still, spoke earnestly, passionately.

'My boy, my boy!' he cried, in a sudden outburst of horror; 'you've read your Bible

well. Do you remember how Abraham offered up Isaac ?'

Owen's heart stood still within him. He knew it must come ; but now it had come at last it was very, very terrible. Strong and brave though he was, he was young and vigorous ; and in youth to die, above all to be condemned to death, is simply heart-rending. And then there was Ionê. But he would never flinch from it. True Russian that he was in fibre, he would meet it, he determined, with Russian resignation and Russian fatalism. He bent his head in reply, and, speaking low in the tongue of his ancestors, made answer in the words of Isaac, 'Behold, my father, the fire and the wood.' For he was ready for the sacrifice.

Mr. Hayward rose up and stood pallid before him. Tears gathered in his eyes. His voice was thick and broken.

'Owen, Owen, my son,' he cried, very low but sadly ; 'I'd give my own life if only I

could let this cup pass from you. I've turned it over in my own heart a hundred times; I've wrestled with it and struggled against it; but I see no way out of it. If *I* didn't strike, others would; for you are not your own—you are bought with a price; and *I* am not the only depositary of the secret. Others have shared with me for twenty years this burden and this hope. Others have heard from time to time all the chances and changes of the game as it went. They learned only the other day this appointment had been offered you. I wrote it them myself, in accordance with our arrangement. If *I* were to draw back now, *they* would follow up my work for me. . . . For your sake, for Ionê's, I've devised and perfected a more merciful way. There's no other plan possible now; I've decided upon this one.'

'What one is that?' Owen asked, trembling, but still submissive, still respectful.

Mr. Hayward paused

'I can't tell you yet,' he said, wiping the tears from his cheek as they rolled slowly down without any pretence at concealment. 'If I told you, I'd give way, and there'd be a scene and a disclosure; and for the sake of the Cause—for Sacha's sake, for Ionê's—I couldn't bear *that*. It would be too, too terrible. . . . I mean, they'd know afterwards it was no accident, no casualty, but a prearranged plan. I don't want them to know that. Whatever Ionê may guess, whatever Sacha may guess, whatever Olga Mireff may guess, I want the world at large to think it was a mere unforeseen chance. . . . On that account I was glad your poor hand had been crushed. With a man of your physique it makes an accident like this . . . a little less improbable.'

'Why, what am I to do?' Owen asked, gasping hard. For Ionê's sake he could have wished it had been otherwise.

'Nothing,' Mr. Hayward answered, con-

trolling his voice with difficulty. 'Nothing, nothing, nothing. Only come out with me to-morrow morning. I can't describe it. Ces choses-la se font, mais ne se disent pas. And the less you know beforehand, in any way, the better. *I* will arrange the rest. It's more merciful so. . . . My boy, my boy, I do it all to spare you!'

He dropped into a chair, his hands clasped between his knees, the very picture of misery. For half an hour more they sat moodily silent. When Mrs. Wilcox came in from time to time, indeed, Mr. Hayward roused himself for the moment, with an evident effort. He talked as well as he was able in a forced tone of cheerfulness about the nothings of the day—people they knew in common, his latest photographs, the morning's news, the local surroundings of Benlade. He'd taken some good negatives of these frost-bespangled trees. But as soon as the landlady went out again they relapsed with one

accord into the same listless attitudes as before. Owen sat gloomily and looked at the fire. Mr. Hayward sat gloomily and looked at Owen.

At last bedtime came. Mr. Hayward rose uneasily and took a bedroom candle. Then he turned and gazed at his ward—his victim—ruthfully.

'Owen,' he said, in a solemn voice, 'you're as dear to me and as precious as if you were my own very son. I've watched and thought, watched and thought, watched and thought, night by night, how I could manage to save you from this hateful necessity. I've struggled and wrestled with myself between the long slow hours in the early morning. I've prayed for light. But no light has come to me. It's terrible, terrible! My boy, I'd give my life for you—oh, so gladly, so willingly! But my life is nothing. To think how I've seen you grow, and watched your progress with pride, and filled my heart with the joy of you! And

was it all for this? Oh, Owen, I wish to God I'd let you die in the snow that dreadful day at Wilna!'

Owen stood opposite him, candle in hand, all softened by his mute look of unspeakable anguish.

'Mr. Hayward,' he answered slowly, 'I'll die willingly, if that's all. I don't mind dying. . . . It's what I was brought up for.'

Mr. Hayward's soul went up from him in one deadly groan.

'Die? Die?' he said bitterly. 'Why, that's nothing, nothing. I could have borne to see you die, if it had been for martyred Russia! A mother even can bear to see her son die—a soldier's death—on the field of battle. But to die like this, inglorious, by a traitor's doom, with no task performed, no duty fulfilled, to escape a people's curse and a people's vengeance—it's *that* that stings me to the core—it's *that* that freezes my life-blood.'

And seizing his ward's hand very remorsefully in his own, he shook it hard twice, and went up to a sleepless night in his own cottage bedroom.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SENTENCE OF DEATH.

All that night long, till morning dawned, Owen never slept. How could he, indeed? He was a condemned criminal. He perfectly understood now he was to die the next day. Mr. Hayward had decreed it—remorsefully, self-reproachfully—but, still, decreed it. No sentence of any regularly constituted court could have had greater validity in Owen Cazalet's eyes than that man's mere word. His orders were, 'Come out with me to-morrow.'

'Come out with me to-morrow?' What could that phrase mean? Owen wondered. Was it dagger, or dynamite, or revolver, or

poison? And why had Mr. Hayward brought him down by himself to this remote place to kill him? Here detection was certain; to pass in the crowd, impossible. Why not, then, in London, where escape is so easy? Why here, where every stranger became at once by his mere presence a conspicuous person? Owen turned it over in his own mind, but found no answer anywhere. He didn't even know to what manner of death he was condemned. That made it the more terrible. He knew only this much—he must die to-morrow.

And Ionê? Of Ionê he couldn't bear to think. Yet here, under the bodily spell of Mr. Hayward's commanding voice and Mr. Hayward's compelling eye, he could no more dream of disobedience to his chief than the soldier in the ranks can dream of mutiny before the very face of the general. Even Ionê herself was half forgotten for the moment. He thought most now of the

pain and distress he was causing Mr. Hayward.

Hour after hour passed by—the clock clanged them in turn—and still he lay awake, and tossed and turned, and wondered. Towards morning, however, strange to say, youth and strength prevailed, and he dozed off into a deep sleep, as peaceful and undisturbed as the sleep of childhood.

At eight he woke with a start, rose in haste, much ashamed of himself, and went down to breakfast. It was the last he would ever eat—for he must die this morning. Mr. Hayward was there before him, pale, haggard, unhappy. The miserable look on the man's face struck Owen dumb with pity. More even than for himself he felt for Mr. Hayward. He gazed hard at him for a minute or two before he could make up his mind to speak. Then he said in a very soft and gentle voice:

'I'm afraid you've had no sleep. You look dreadfully tired.'

Mr. Hayward turned round upon him with all the fierceness of despair.

'Sleep!' he echoed. 'Sleep! How could I sleep at such a moment? Owen, I've passed twelve hours of speechless agony. I've fought more devils through the night than ever hell turned out. Russia and the Cause have trembled and tottered like a quicksand beneath my feet. My faith has vanished. . . . Owen, my boy, my boy, I'd give the world to keep you.'

Owen stared at him, cold to the bone.

'I wish it could have been otherwise,' he said slowly, with bloodless lips. 'But if it's needful I must die, I die willingly, ungrudgingly.'

The elder man rose, crushed a piece of paper in his hand, and flung it into the fire with a bitter gesture.

'Owen,' he cried, once more, 'I'm ashamed of myself for saying it. I'm going back upon the faith and hope of a lifetime in

saying it. I'm a devil for saying it. But, Owen, if all Russia in one person knelt there before me this moment with one neck to strike, I swear to God—oh, it's horrible—I'd lift my sword and strike her, willingly strike her, to save you.'

Owen bent his head meekly as if to receive the blow.

'If it must be, it must be,' he answered in all reverence, all humble resignation.

Mr. Hayward sat down and pretended to eat. He broke an egg, scooped it out, and flung the contents in the fire. He drank off half a cup of coffee, that choked him as he swallowed it, and then thrust his bread in his pocket, unable to eat it. The very drink almost burned him like molten metal. His face was livid and blue with his unspeakable misery.

As for Owen, he ate and drank as a condemned man will sometimes do on the morning of his execution, just to keep his courage

up. That ghastly uncertainty about the mode of death chosen for him made him quiver with excitement. It was so terrible, too, that he couldn't even write a line to Ionê to tell her what must happen. He ate and drank in solemn silence, his guardian all the time looking on at him and groaning.

After breakfast, Mr. Hayward left the room for a minute, and Mrs. Wilcox came in to clear the table.

'Poor dear gentleman,' she said compassionately. 'He don't seem no better at all, but rather a bit worse if anythink this morning. I was in hopes when you come down, sir, it might 'a done him a power o' good to have fresh young blood about the house, as one may say, he's that dull and miserable. But, Lord, it ain't done him no good at all, as I can see; he's worse this morning nor ever I've known him—no colour nor nothink. And he tossed and turned, and got up so in the night and walked about his room, that

Wilcox he couldn't sleep for lying awake and listening to him. He says he do think Mr. Hayward must have a presentiment . . . and well he may, poor dear gentleman, for he ain't long for this world, that's certain. I wish he'd take some o' that there curative extract as saved my sister's life after ten years in a decline, an' her every bit as bad in her time as what he is.'

'I'm afraid,' Owen said gravely, 'it wouldn't do him much good. His case is too far gone for curative extracts now. Nothing's likely to save him. He's past hope, Mrs. Wilcox.'

A minute or two later Mr. Hayward came down again. He had on a rough pea jacket and a flannel boating cap.

'This is how I go attired to take my walks abroad in the dingey,' he said with a ghastly attempt at some pretence of levity. 'Are you game for a row, Owen? It's chilly, but nice and clear on the water this morning, and

I find nothing warms me up like a turn on the river.'

'All right,' Owen answered, endeavouring to imitate his friend's forced cheerfulness. 'I'm not very fit myself, with my hand and arm like this, but it's best to use them, after all—it prevents stiffness.'

He followed Mr. Hayward, all wondering, to the bank, where Wilcox, the landlord, stood waiting with the dingey and the canoe, armed with a long-handled boat-hook. Mr. Hayward took his seat in the bigger of the two boats, and put the sculls in the row-locks.

'You'll try the canoe, Owen,' he said. 'Mind how you get into her. She's an unsteady little craft, lopsided in a high wind. Topples over in a minute if you cough or sneeze or wink in her.'

Owen jumped lightly in.

'Oh, I'm accustomed to canoes,' he answered, now beginning to catch vague

glimpses of what was coming next. 'I can do just what I like in them—stand up in them, lie down in them, dance a hornpipe, if necessary. I never upset. They're as easy as A B C when once you know the ways of them.'

He took the paddle in his maimed right hand, and tried a stroke or two, double-handed. It hurt his wrist a good deal, but he pretended to disregard it. Wilcox gave them a push with the long-handled boat-hook out into mid-stream, where the current caught them, and they glided away merrily down river towards Oxford.

The Thames was, of course, deserted at that time of year. Recent frosts on the canals had checked even the barge traffic. Not a soul stood about, not a boat was on the river. They made their way alone round a bend of the stream, between silent banks, where the sedges drooped over the brink, heavily weighted with icicles. Bare pollard

willows shut them in to the right, with beds of osiers whistling beyond in the wintry breeze. To the left were flooded water meadows. It was a dreary prospect. All was cold, and dim, and dreary, and desolate. At last Owen spoke.

'Shall I . . . ever come back again?' he asked in a tremulous undertone.

Mr. Hayward's voice was hardly audible through choked sobs.

'No, my boy,' he answered with an effort; 'or only to the churchyard.'

They rowed or paddled on then for a mile or two in silence. It was a lonely reach of the stream. No houses stood in sight, and even the towpath by the side lay still and deserted. Presently the dingey, which led the way by some twenty yards, turned sharply to the right down a still lonelier backwater. It was a fairly broad channel, used to turn a paper-mill; its bank was beset by tall flags and the dead stems of withered

willow-herb. Owen followed in the canoe, with a vague presentiment of coming ill. At the end rose a sound of rushing waters.

Mr. Hayward spoke just once. His voice was now terribly calm and stern; but it was the calmness of despair, the sternness of the inevitable.

'There's a mill by the main stream just below,' he said, in an inflexible tone. 'This backwater's the leet—over yonder's the overflow. It leads to a dam on the left; and beyond it I've found a very dangerous lasher.'

'I see,' Owen answered blindly, paddling forward once more in tremulous silence. He could feel his heart beat. He knew now what was coming.

As they reached the calm expanse at the top of the dam, Owen took it all in, step by step, unbidden. The water rushed deep enough over the lasher to float a small boat. The current ran fierce, and could engulf a

man down in a canoe without difficulty. Below lay a deep pool, swirling and simmering with undercurrents. In its midst, the eddy from the lasher and the eddy from the flood-gates—mingling and battling as they met—made a perpetual turmoil, and churned up the white surface into petty whirlpools, that could suck a swimmer down, even naked and in summer, but that would easily drown him, clogged with clothes and boots on, in icy winter weather.

Mr. Hayward had chosen his place of execution well. It was a very natural spot for an accident to happen. Owen saw it at a glance. Boat drawn down by the swirl, man upset and drowned there.

He glanced at the seething eddies, and at the board by the side, 'To Bathers: Dangerous.' Then he scanned his own strong limbs, and turned with a meaning look to Mr. Hayward.

'It's lucky the water's ice-cold,' he said,

in a calm, deep voice, growing still with despair, 'and that my hand's so mangled. Otherwise, I don't think I could possibly drown in such a narrow space, even trying to do it. Those whirlpools aren't fierce enough. I swim too well. You see, it's almost impossible, however much you may wish it, not to struggle and strike out when you feel yourself drowning. The water gets in your throat, and you kick away, in spite of yourself. Besides, I'm so strong. I should flounder out, willy-nilly. But I'll see what I can manage. I'll do my best to restrain myself.'

'So do,' Mr. Hayward made answer, in the same inexorable tone, as of offended Russia. He rowed nearer and nearer, and motioned Owen to pass him. 'Now—here!' he cried, pointing with one finger to a rush of green water, in the very centre of the lasher, sliding smooth down its rapid slope into the wild thick of the whirlpool. 'When

I cry "Off!" let go your paddle, and down the lasher full pelt. Upset boat at the bottom, and don't dare to swim a stroke. Hold your hands to your sides. Those are my orders—my orders. . . . Oh, heavens! I can't say the words. . . . Owen, Owen, Owen!'

And, indeed, as Owen, obeying his gesture, moved out into the full current, and paused with poised paddle, awaiting the fatal signal, 'Off!' a sudden access of horror and awe seemed to have seized his chief, who, even as he cried his name thrice, let the oars drop unexpectedly, clapped his two hands to his ears, as women and children often do when terrified, and sobbed aloud in his agony once more:

'Oh, Owen, Owen, Owen!'

Then, before Owen could say what was happening, the whole spirit of the scene was suddenly changed, as if by magic. A terrible awe came over him. The rush of the water,

catching the heavy dingey, no longer held back by the force of Mr. Hayward's arms, hurried it forward like lightning. Down, down it clashed madly over the inclined plane of the lasher. At the bottom, a rebellious undertow of white foam surged ceaselessly back, as if in anger, on the dark green flow. Arrived at that point, the dingey capsized like a helpless hulk. The sculls disappeared all at once in the seething gulf, the boat floating off by herself, bottom upwards. And Mr. Hayward's sacred head, the most venerable and venerated in the Nihilist hierarchy, showed dark for one moment as a black spot on the white foam . . . and then went under resistlessly.

At that appalling sight, Owen burst like a child into a wild shout of horror. Mr. Hayward upset! Mr. Hayward drowning! In a moment his own danger was forgotten forthwith in the profound realization of that irreparable loss to Russia and to humanity. Oh,

how terrible he should be so hampered by that crushed and mangled hand! But, still, he must risk it. Could he bring him out alive? Over, over, and try for it!

CHAPTER XXXV.

DISCIPLINE.

With a wild cry of alarm, Owen steered his canoe into the midst of the stream, and dashed straight down the lasher, after Mr. Hayward. At its foot the canoe upset, and the paddle was wrenched from his hands—he had expected that much. Next moment he found himself, in coat and boots and trousers, battling hard for dear life in the icy-cold water.

Just at first the mad current sucked him under with its force, and cast him up again as it willed, and sucked him down once more, helpless, like a straw below Niagara. He danced about, flung hither and thither at its

caprice, half unconscious. But after a minute or two, as he grew gradually more used to the icy chill, he felt his limbs alive, and struck out with desperate strokes, in spite of the wounded arm that shot pain along its whole length at every fierce contraction of those powerful muscles. Even then, for a second or two, the natural instinct of self-preservation alone inspired him. He plunged blindly towards the shore, in a wild fight with the numbing eddies, without so much as ever remembering, under the deadening effect of the sudden shock on his nerves, the existence of Mr. Hayward or his pressing danger. The water all round seemed to absorb and engross his entire attention. He was conscious only of deadly cold, and of the undertow that dragged him down, in his clinging clothes, and of sharp pains in his arms that all but disabled him for swimming.

After very few such strokes, however, he came to himself suddenly. With another

wild cry, the truth broke in upon him again. Mr. Hayward! Mr. Hayward! Drowning, drowning, drowning! In an agony of horror, Owen Cazalet raised himself, as by a superhuman effort, head and shoulders above the cold flood, and peered around him, aghast, for his friend and guardian. Not a sign of the man anywhere! Not a mark, not a token! He must have gone under for ever. At that thought, Owen's blood ran colder within him than even the ice-cold water without. This was all his own doing! This was the outcome of his defection! He was his master's murderer! By his betrayal of the Cause, it was *he* who had brought Mr. Hayward into such deadly peril! Help, help! oh, help! What would he not do to retrieve himself? But how to do it? How save him? How repair this evil?

Frozen without and within, but fiery hot at heart with this new sense of wild danger—not for himself, not for himself, but for the chief

of the Cause, the man he revered and respected above all men living—Owen began to swim on once more, with fiery zeal, no longer shoreward now, but straight down the mid-pool in the direction where the eddies must have carried Mr. Hayward. As he swam, his maimed arm at each stroke grew more and more unbearably painful. But still he persevered, striking out with both legs and with his left arm, as best he might, while the right hung useless, battling the eddies in a fierce struggle, escaping with difficulty from those great watery arms that tried to clutch at him from below with intangible fingers, and whirl him resistlessly in their vortex, and pull him under like a straw, to fling him up again a mangled corpse on the milk-white foam some hundred yards further. It was a life-and-death grapple. Owen wrestled with the water as one might wrestle in fight with a human combatant.

At last, as he fought his way out into one

upbubbling swash, that surged oozily to the top, a dark object in front of him rose for a second, uncertain, on the gurgling surface. Hair, hair! a man's head! It was him—Mr. Hayward! With a mad impulse of joy, Owen lunged out at it and seized it. He held it aloft in his grasp, propped it up again, caught and clutched it. The water tried to wrest it away, but Owen clung to it and kept it. The left hand under the chin! Under the arm! Under the shoulder! He was alive still—alive! Breathing, choking, and sputtering!

'Oh, Mr. Hayward, cling tight to me!' Owen cried, between fear and joy. 'Not on my arms. Don't impede me. Let me hold you under the chest—so. Now strike out. To land! to landward!'

But Mr. Hayward, half drowned, and numbed with the cold, made answer in a voice rendered half inaudible by the water in his windpipe:

'No, no; let me drown, my boy. Don't

try to save me; don't swim ; don't strike out. Let us both go down together !'

At that moment, as he steadied himself, one of the sculls rose up, bobbing, by his side on the water. Owen seized it, and made Mr. Hayward grip his deadened white fingers round the thick part of the shaft. Then, holding it himself at the same time, and striking out with his two strong thighs, he tried with all his might to push his rescued friend shoreward. But Mr. Hayward, seeing what he meant, unclasped his hooked fingers, and let the oar go suddenly. In a second he had gone under again, the water sucking him in as the eddy from an oar sucks down a floating speck of feathery swan's-down. Once more Owen plunged after him, and dived, with breath held hard, into the ice-cold whirlpool. It was an awful moment. He felt his wind fail him. The water was in his nostrils, his mouth, his lungs. Groping blindly in the dark, he caught a coat a second time. Then

he clutched his man by the arm, and, with a terrible spurt, brought him back to the surface. There, a deadly struggle began between the two men—the rescuer and the rescued—in the piercing cold water. Mr. Hayward fought hard for leave to drown if he chose; he gripped Owen so tight he almost dragged him under. Owen, on his side, fought hard in return to save his friend's life—and all the hopes of Russia. His wounded arm got a fierce wrench, too, in the scuffle, that made him scream aloud with pain, and all but unmanned him for the fight. But still he persevered. It was with difficulty he kept himself up, and floundered on through the water, fighting his way every inch, with Mr. Hayward pressed close, like a baby, to his bosom. Thank Heaven for one thing—he was a wonderful swimmer. The very hopelessness of the case seemed of itself to instil fresh force into his limbs. The struggle was so hard, the odds against him so enormous. With clothes and

boots, and in that numbing cold, maimed of one arm, he yet stemmed the deadly stream, and brought out the drowning man, against his own will, to the bankside.

By that time his force had almost failed him. But still, with a desperate spring, he lifted himself ashore, by leaning on his wounded right, and vaulting out of the water, while with his left he retained his grasp on Mr. Hayward's collar. After that, he dragged his companion unceremoniously to the bank, and laid him there panting and shivering, a torn and draggled thing, in a great wet mass of close and clinging clothing.

Mr. Hayward looked up at him, faintly, through a dim mist of watery eyes.

'What did you do that for, my boy?' he asked, in a sort of despairing expostulation.

'I couldn't let you drown, could I?' Owen answered doggedly, leaning over him all dripping.

'And I would have let *you!*' Mr. Hay-

ward retorted, pulling himself together, and sitting up, the very picture of blank and dismal despair, in his wet, icy clothes, with the cold wind whistling through them.

'But that was different,' Owen answered. 'I had broken the bond, and deserved the penalty. I was waiting there, ready for the word of command. When that word came, I'd have gone over and drowned myself then and there without a moment's hesitation.'

'Owen, you are a man!' Mr. Hayward cried, raising himself.

Owen stood up in his turn, and grasped the cold hand hard.

'Now, run back to the village,' he cried, 'as quick and fast as you can go. Don't delay another minute. Our Russia has need of you.'

He turned to the brink himself, in his dripping things, and looking wistfully at the water. It was hard to die—hard to leave Ionê; but the Cause demanded it. As he

stood and gazed, Mr. Hayward laid his hand on his pupil's shoulder with the old kindly weight.

'My boy, what are you going to do?' he cried, startled. 'You won't surely try again? You'll come back to the inn with me?'

But Owen only gazed harder at the great gurgling eddies from which he had just with such difficulty and danger emerged. The cold hand now numbed him.

'No, no! That was to save your life,' he said with chattering teeth. 'I know my duty, I hope. Go, go—and be safe! When once you're well out of sight I shall do as I ought: I shall obey my orders.'

'Owen!' Mr. Hayward cried, holding him tight. 'Never! never! You can't! You've got no orders! I haven't given them yet! Do as you're told. Hold back. Discipline's discipline. This isn't what I bid you. It was to be at the word "Off," and I've never spoken it.'

'Well, you've spoken it now, then!' Owen answered, half mad with cold and despair. 'I hope I'm no coward. I won't take advantage of having saved your life against tremendous odds, to save my own against your express orders. Good-bye, Mr. Hayward. I've been a useless son, an unprofitable servant. I've served Russia ill. This is the only thing now. . . . Good-bye! good-bye! Give my love to Ionê!'

And without one moment's delay, tearing himself madly from the man's grasp, he plunged once more into the icy-cold pool that gurgled and bubbled in deadly tide before him.

True soldier to the last, he obeyed his sealed orders.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

'HOC ERAT IN VOTIS.'

Mr. Hayward stood aghast. Mr. Hayward paused and hesitated. Not in doubt, not in suspense, but in pure bodily shrinking from a second fierce conflict with that deadly water. For some instants he gazed at the swirling current, irresolute. Then, lifting his hands to dive—for the bank shelved sheer, and the bottom was many feet deep in shore—he plunged boldly in after him, and struck out with all his might in the direction where Owen had disappeared beneath the surface.

It was no easy task, however, to find him; for this time the lad, as he had no life to save, bore his first instructions in mind, and

allowed his wounded arm to lie idle by his side without struggling or floundering. Nay, more, as far as he was able, being now spent with swimming, he let himself go like a log, and drift under with the current. It had whirled him away at once, down blind channels under water. But Mr. Hayward was by this time quite as much in earnest as Owen himself. The instinct of saving life, which comes upon all of us in any great crisis, had got the better of him involuntarily. He *couldn't* let that boy drown, be he traitor or no traitor—Owen, his own Owen, his heart's fondest pride, his disciple and his friend, the child that was ten thousand times nearer and dearer than a son to him. With the mad energy of despair, he dived and plunged through the greedy eddies, letting the current suck him under and toss him up again as it would, but filled all the while with one devouring thought—the absolute necessity for bringing back Owen. He had sent him like a criminal

to his death—his own dear, dear boy; and now the deed was done, he would have given his own life a dozen times over to bring him back again in safety.

At last, by a miracle of keen vision, such as occurs at supreme moments to high nervous organizations, he caught sight of a dark object far below in the water—down, down, deep down, carried along in full torrent. His heart throbbed at the sight. Diving once more with all his force, he plunged under and clutched at it. Owen, half conscious still, half insensible with the cold, tried to slip from his grasp—that was a point of honour. He struggled to be free, and to drown. With an effort he eluded the eager hand that clutched him, and went under a second time, borne headlong by the rapids. 'Oh God! he's drowning!' Yet again Mr. Hayward dived, again caught him by the collar, held him firm at arm's length, and brought him out—chilled, inert, and motionless—to the

surface. This time Owen's eyes were fast shut; his cheeks were deadly white, his lips looked deep blue, his chest and lungs moved not. Mr. Hayward had hard work to hold him up with one hand—a seemingly lifeless corpse—above the water's edge, while with the other he struck out fiercely for the high bank beyond him.

It was a hopeless struggle. How could he think to reach land? Numbed, damped, and half drowned, with that listless, dead weight poised, all prone, on the water's brim in front of him, Mr. Hayward plunged and fought, and battled slowly on with what life was left in him, and felt all the while the water sucking him down—irresistibly down—towards the race of the paper-mill. He was losing ground each minute, and gasping hard now for breath. The water filled his ears, his nostrils, his throat. He could hardly hold up against it. Yet, in an agony of despair, he still bore Owen aloft, and kept

the lad's mouth just a hair's breadth above the surface with superhuman energy.

He couldn't have endured one minute longer. He felt himself going; his eyes closed mistily. But just then, as he gasped and plunged, and knew all was up, a voice rang clear from ten yards in front:

'Keep him aloft there, maister. We're almost on 'im. That's right! Catch the pole! You 'ang on. I'll 'ook 'im.'

Mr. Hayward looked up, and saw dimly before him two men in a punt, one holding out a pole, while the other lunged towards them with a friendly boat-hook.

The drowning man seized the pole eagerly, and still clutching Owen's coat-collar, put the boat-hook through and through it, and let the men in the punt haul their burden in carefully. Then he scrambled into the boat himself, and, dripping from head to foot, sat down in the bottom, cold, wretched, and shivering.

'Is he dead?' he asked in a hollow voice, and with chattering teeth, feeling for the first time in his life like an actual murderer.

One of the men turned Owen over with that irreverent carelessness so characteristic of his class in dealing with a corpse—or what they believe to be one.

'Drowned, I take it,' he answered, feeling the motionless pulse and then the silent heart. 'Not a stir or a stroke in 'im. Anyhow, he ain't breathing just now, as I can feel. But there's no knowing with these 'ere cases o' wot they calls suspended animation. Bringin' 'em back again to life, that's more like wot it is. We'll take him down to mill, and see wot we can do with 'im.'

Mr. Hayward bent over the pale face, all horror-struck in heart at this too terrible success of his scheme and his orders.

'Oh, don't say he's dead!' he cried aloud, wringing his hands. 'Don't tell me he's drowned! You'll break my poor heart worse

than it's broken already if you tell me that. Oh, Owen, Owen, Owen, Owen!'

The second man looked on with that curious philosophical calm that belongs to the waterside.

'We seed the dingey a-comin' down-stream bottom upward,' he volunteered slowly, punting away as he spoke; 'and I says to George, says I, "Why, George, that's Wilcox's dingey, surely!" And George he says to me, "That's so," says he, "Jim. Somebody's upset, for certain." And then come the canoe, turned topsy-turvy, as you may term it; and says I to George, "Blest," says I, "if it ain't them folks up to Wilcox's! Don't know how to handle a boat, seems—not a bit, they don't. Gone clean over lasher." So I went out with the punt, and I up with the pole, and comes down on the look-out for savin' a life, thinkin', at least, to earn a honest suvverin.'

Mr. Hayward was in no mood just then to

reflect to himself upon the man's frank sordidness of nature. He, who knew men and women so well, could feel no surprise at such utter callousness. But he was too full of his own grief to find room for anything else. He only cried aloud, in a perfect paroxysm of remorse and wounded affection:

'If you can bring that boy to life again, you shall have—not a sovereign, but fifty guineas!'

The man Jim raised his head, and opened his mouth and eyes. He could hardly believe his ears. He repeated slowly:

'Fifty guineas!'

But the other man cried hastily:

'Pole ahead to the mill, Jim. He've got some life in him still.' He felt the cold heart carefully. 'We might bring him to yet, with brandy and blankets and such. Pole ahead for dear life! 'Tain't every day

o' the week one gets the chance o' earnin' fifty guineas !'

Obedient to the word, Jim poled ahead with a will, Mr. Hayward still crouching cold on the bare floor of the punt, and leaning over Owen, who lay calm and white as a corpse, with open, sightless eyes turned staringly upward. In a minute or two they reached the staithe, or little millside landing-place. The two men jumped out, and, with no more ceremony than they would have used to a bale of wastepaper, lifted Owen between them. Mr. Hayward followed them into the mill-keeper's house. There, all in a moment, was confusion and bustle. The inmates, well used to such scenes, got to work immediately.

'There's fifty guineas on it, mother,' Jim murmured to his wife, and the woman nodded.

They brought down blankets in hot haste, and, stripping off Owen's wet clothing, laid

him down in them, well warmed, before the kitchen fire. Then they poured brandy down his throat, and began to move his arms up and down with a measured motion.

'Regular way to bring 'em to,' the man said calmly. 'Same as you breathe yourself, on'y slower. Fill the lungs each go. Directions of the Royal 'Umane Society.'

For twenty minutes they rubbed and chafed, and worked his arms continuously. Mr. Hayward, loosely wrapped himself in the mill-keeper's ulster, sat with chattering teeth looking on in blank despair. Owen was dead, dead, dead! and all was worse than lost to him!

He had meant to let the boy drown, and then go over himself, as if he had been accidentally lost in trying to save his companion. But that Owen should die, and that he should survive him like this—that was unutterable, unspeakable, too wholly ghastly and crushing!

'I've murdered him! I've murdered him!' he cried to himself in Russian, many, many times over, wringing his numb hands wretchedly beside the white, motionless body.

But the men worked on, meanwhile, taking no notice of his groans, with mechanical persistence and strange perseverance. Fifty guineas were at stake, and you never really can tell when a body's drowned! They moved the arms up and down in long, measured swing, to make artificial breathing, many minutes after Mr. Hayward had given up all for lost and relapsed into hopeless and speechless misery.

At last, all at once, after one vigorous movement, a sigh, a flutter in the breast, a strange gasp, a start, then—

'He's breathing! He's breathing!'

Mr. Hayward, thrilled through at the words, looked down at him in breathless and eager anxiety. The bare bosom was heaving and falling now once more.

'Brandy! brandy!' cried the man George, and Mr. Hayward passed it to him.

Another long interval, and Owen opened his eyes. Mr. Hayward fell on his knees in a wild transport of joy.

'Thank heaven!' he cried fervently in Russian once more. 'Then I haven't murdered him!'

And Owen, gazing dimly through a vague mist of faintness, seemed to see his friend's face held anxiously over him. He raised his white hand.

'Mr. Hayward—Mr. Hayward,' he said; 'Ionê—Ionê!'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN UNHAPPY APOSTATE.

After the tragedy of it, the comedy. There's nothing on earth more absurd than the drowned rat of the proverb. Wet, cold, and wretched, Mr. Hayward sat on shivering, and watched for an hour or two beside the rude trestle bed they made up in haste for the lad he had tried and intended to murder—or, at least, to aid and abet in a concerted suicide. The woman at the paper-mill urged him to return at once to the Wilcoxes' and get dry clothes and food; he'd catch his death o' cold, she said, in them nasty damp things; but Mr. Hayward wouldn't hear of moving from Owen's bed till he was certain of his re-

covery. The lad, after his breathing was once fairly restored, fell shortly into a deep sleep that lasted some hours. And all the time while he slept Mr. Hayward sat watchful and attentive by his side, and bent over him tenderly.

Slowly Owen recovered, thanks to a splendid constitution. The drowning itself wouldn't have hurt him, the doctor said, but for the cold and the shock; his dangerous symptoms were those of a nervous crisis. And he was ill from the strain. They moved him two days later from the paper-mill to the inn, where, under good Mrs. Wilcox's motherly care, he made gradual progress. To the people in the village, of course, it was only the common and familiar boat accident. 'Young fellow like 'im ought to a' knowed by this time how to manage a canoe; an' a did, too, come to that; on'y the old un missed his tip and went over lasher, and the young un, tryin' to save un, got upsot hisself

and went flounderin' about after un in the ice-cold water. Them currents do set strong by they floodgates above paper-mill. Easy enough to drownd one's self there, even at the best o' times, let alone in freezin' cold winter weather.'

The day after the 'accident' Mr. Hayward despatched a penitent telegram, nominally to Sacha, but really, of course, to Ionê. 'Owen upset in canoe in the river and nearly drowned. I helped to rescue him. He is now recovering and doing very well. Come down, if you like, with Ionê to nurse him.'

That same night, needless to say, the two girls were by his side. Ionê met Mr. Hayward with a natural look of the profoundest suspicion. But Mr. Hayward, ever gentle and courteous as of old, half disarmed her wrath at once by taking her aside and into the next room, and holding her hand in his while he said to her frankly:

'Little daughter, I love him as if I were

his own father. And for his sake I love you, too, Ionê. If only you knew all, you would know I was really trying to save him. But when it came to the point, I couldn't stand it myself, and, even against his own will, I was compelled to rescue him. Though now that I've rescued him, the original danger still stares me in the face. Ionê, it's not me. It's assembled Russia. I've saved him from one death, only to hand him over in the end to another and a worse one.'

Ionê looked at him aghast. It was more than she could understand.

'Mr. Hayward,' she said, not unkindly, for who could be angry with the man?—he had such suffering on his face, such infinite remorse and pain in his weary eyeballs—'I don't know what to make of it all. I'm a simple English girl at heart, in spite of my Greek and Norwegian blood, brought up in London and in a country village, and I can't grasp all these strange things when I

find myself brought face to face with your Russian Nihilism. This mystery appals me. You must tell me what it all means. *What* is this strange danger that hangs over Owen?'

Mr. Hayward paused and gazed at her. He was holding her hand still—that soft, round little hand, with the dimples at the joints—and he smoothed it with his own, very gently and tenderly. They were contrasted, those two hands, like Russia and England. Ruric Brassoff's was thin, hard, iron-looking, virile; Ionè Dracopoli's was delicate and rounded, and the soft flesh stood out on it, dimpled, so that it yielded to the touch like a padded book-cover.

'My daughter,' the stern man said slowly in his silvery voice, 'you're the only person alive—man, woman, or child—who ever yet penetrated the secret of my existence. And now, I suppose, in time you'll be Owen's wife. What use in concealing from you what you

must know hereafter? Sooner or later I must have an explanation with Owen—must tell him the difficulties that lie in my way, and the means I shall use or try to use in the effort—the hopeless effort—to meet and avert them. When that explanation comes—Ioné, it's promising a great deal; it's breaking all the vows and oaths by which our society is bound; it's exposing the secrets of the Cause to a woman and an outsider — but . . . I trust you so much, you shall be present and hear it.'

He said it with such an air of distinguished honour conferred that Ioné herself couldn't help feeling deeply complimented.

'Thank you,' she said in reply. 'But, Mr. Hayward, one thing. You must answer me that, or how can I hold your hand? Did you, or did you not, upset him into the water?'

Mr. Hayward withdrew his hand quickly, as if he had been stung. His face, already

lined and pallid with suspense, showed every sign of acute pain at the bare suggestion.

'Ionê!' he cried, drawing back. 'Oh, how could you? How can you? How much you misunderstand me if you think such a question worth asking! How much you misunderstand *him* if you think such a step would ever be necessary.'

'Then he tried to drown himself of his own accord!' Ionê exclaimed, bridling up and deeply stirred with horror.

'Wait and ask him,' Mr. Hayward answered. 'He'll be better soon. He'll be able to tell you. All I can say myself just at present is this: If I advised him to take such an unhappy course it was only to save him—and you, too, through him—from greater pain and worse disgrace in the end, from which I don't know now how I'm ever to save you.'

Ionê looked at him fixedly. The man's drawn face was wrung by despair and evident anguish. She gave her hand once more.

'I believe you, Mr. Hayward,' she said simply. Somehow, it was impossible to be near that strange being and not to sympathize with him for the moment. He had tried to drown her Owen—of that Ionê felt sure; and yet—and yet he had done it, she vaguely recognised herself, in no unfriendly spirit. He might be a murderer, perhaps; but, at least, he was a murderer with the best possible intentions.

It was dreadful for simple English people like her and Owen to get mixed up with these incomprehensible and too complex Russian revolutionists. Yet what could they do? He was born to it; it was his destiny.

Mr. Hayward stroked his face with one inscrutable hand. There was blank despondency in the action. Ionê felt it, and was sorry for him. Then he paced up and down the room once or twice in silence. At last he spoke again. His words came in a rush like a summer torrent.

'My child,' he said, bursting forth, 'if you knew all, you would pity me. Ah, yes, you would pity me—oh, how you would pity me! A fortnight ago I saw myself within measurable distance of the realization of the hopes of a lifetime. I was glad. I was exultant. I was full of joy and triumph. At that very moment when I wrote to Owen to tell him of our great good luck—to bid him rejoice with me, to assure him of victory—there came in return such a knock-down blow that I thought no blow on earth could ever be harder—no fate more terrible. Fortune, I said to myself, had done the very worst she could possibly have in store for me. My cup was dashed down as I held it to my lips. Owen, my own boy, whom I loved more dearly than I loved my life—for whom I'd sacrificed everything—whom I'd watched and guarded and taught since he was a baby in arms, just able to lisp his own name in Russian—Owen, Owen went

back upon me. It was he and no other. He told me that for the love of a girl he'd wrecked our hopes and plans irretrievably. . . . And did I hate that girl for it? . . . No, Ionê, no; for Owen's sake, I loved her —and I love her.'

He laid his hand like a father on the loose chestnut curls. Ionê felt a thrill run responsive through and through her. The man's eye was as one inspired. His lip quivered convulsively. He went on yet more quickly.

'That was bad, little daughter,' he said, still fondling the chestnut curls—and Ionê hadn't the heart even to try to prevent him. 'That was bad. That was a fall, a relapse, a backsliding. Still, though my soul was broken, I had one thing left—and that was Owen. All my hopes for him were gone—crushed, annihilated, shattered. But Owen himself—and only Owen—was left. The boy, not the liberator; my son, not my

instrument. . . . I had hoped for a Messiah who would free poor Russia. I was left with a dear child—a mere handsome young Englishman. But I loved him still. Oh, Ionê, how I loved him! As the hopes within me fell, crushed, so the affections quickened. I said to myself: "I've loved Russia like a fanatic all my weary long life, but Owen and Russia have grown so intertwined and mixed up in my ideas—so one in my inmost soul — so indistinguishably blended—that now, oh God! I don't know which is which." I love Owen in the end even better than Russia. There he stands—concrete, visible—a definite tangible Somebody for one's heart to take hold of. I love him with all my soul. When it came to the pinch, I couldn't bear to lose him.'

He paced up and down once more. Then he returned to her, all on fire. His eyes glowed terribly.

'Ionê,' he cried in his despair, 'I can't

tell you all now. It would burn my very heart out. But this much I *will* tell you—let Owen tell the rest. I felt if he must die I could never outlive him. Not a day, not an hour, not a minute, not a second. He was part of my life—a limb of my body. Oh, Ionê, it's sin, it's blasphemy to say so; but I found, when I put it to the touch—oh, shame!—I found . . . he was far more to me than even Russia. I fancied to myself I had lived all my life for Russia alone; but I found that day my boy was far more to me in the end than even Russia.

'They would kill him. They would torture you. They would keep you in suspense for months and months, Ionê. Better an easy death for him at my hands than that. Or not even at my hands—at his own; but beside me, in my company. I meant *him* to go over first. I meant at once to follow him; but when I saw him drowning, and was drowning myself, my heart failed within

me. I couldn't bear to permit it. Let them do what they would, I must save Owen's life for the moment—for you. I must prolong it as much as I could. I must bring my boy back—for a time—to the girl that loved him.'

'Thank you,' Ionê said low.

In some dim, distinctive way she was beginning now to understand him.

Mr. Hayward clasped his hands hard in unspeakable horror.

'But that's not all yet!' he cried. 'We're not out of the trouble. As I said to you in Victoria Street, so I say to you still—we're only beginning. I must put my wits to work now—for what do you think, Ionê? Why, to undo my life's work, to annul my life's plans, to prevent the success of my own elaborate precautions! I had arranged everything beforehand, so that a terrible punishment should fall upon myself or upon Owen, as the case might be, if either of us

forgot our troth or proved untrue to our engagements. I had made it as sure as any sentence of any court on earth could be made sure. Now I must brace myself up to see whether and how I can shatter my own hopes and destroy my own handiwork. . . . And I fear it's impossible. I laid my plans too deep; I dug my pit too widely. . . . But for that, and for that alone, I must live in future. . . . Oh, Ionê, dear child, see the extremity of degradation to which you two have reduced me. I meant, if need were, to sacrifice Owen to Russia. I mean now, in the end, to sacrifice Russia to Owen.'

He bent his head down between his arms in an agony of shame and remorse at that painful confession. To him it was apostasy. Ionê couldn't be angry with him now. His case was too miserable. He had tried to play an abstraction against his human affections; and the human affections had proved in the long-run a great deal too strong for him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BAD NEWS FROM KIEFF.

Two or three days later Owen was well enough to be removed to the flat off Victoria Street. Mr. Hayward went up to town with him in a saloon carriage, and the new invalid was put, when he arrived there, into Blackbird's bedroom. Round the wall, as a fitting decoration, Blackbird had painted with her own hands a poetical inscription — four favourite lines of hers from Swinburne's 'Hymn to Proserpina':

'Thou art more than the day or the morrow, the seasons that laugh or that weep;
For these give joy and sorrow—but thou, Proserpina, sleep.

Thou art more than the gods who number the days
of our temporal breath;
For these give labour and slumber—but thou, Pro-
serpina, death.'

Owen watched them all the morning from the bed where they laid him, but in the afternoon he was allowed to move on to the drawing-room sofa. Not that he was really ill—severe as the shock had been, his vigorous constitution had recovered from it quickly—but Mr. Hayward, always devoted to his ward, was as careful over him now as a hen with one chicken. Even Ionê herself had no cause to complain of any want of consideration on Mr. Hayward's part for Owen's safety and Owen's absolute comfort. He fussed about as if his life depended on making Owen well, and keeping him so always. He had but one thought in life now—his boy's happiness, which included, of course, Ionê's.

And Russia—poor Russia? Well, Russia was crushed and pressed out within him. An awful blank reigned in her place in his heart.

His face was one picture of despair and dejection.

But the urgent need now was to provide for Owen's safety. That care weighed hard on Mr. Hayward's soul. For he had planned beforehand against Owen's life by every means in his power.

The very day after they arrived at Victoria Street, he sent Blackbird and Sacha out into the park for a walk, that he might have time for a private talk with Ionê and Owen.

So strange a talk few drawing-rooms in Pimlico can ever have listened to.

He began, and told them the truth from the very beginning. One only fact he suppressed—his own identity with Ruric Brassoff. All the rest he told them in full—making a clean breast of it, as it were, both to Owen and Ionê. He told them all he knew about the St. Petersburg Selistoffs; how he had rescued the two children, twenty years since and more, at the risk of his own life, and

smuggled them out of Wilna; how he had brought them to England, and placed them with Miss Cazalet as their mother's half-sister; how he had come back, three years later, and struck that strange bargain on those mysterious terms with poor unconscious Aunt Julia; and how he had supported Owen ever since in every comfort and luxury on Nihilist money.

There he paused and wiped his brow.

'And that money itself,' he said slowly, in very remorseful tones, 'do you think, my children, I got it for nothing? Do you think there was no security, no collateral guarantee for it? Ah, that's not the way we of the circle went to work on our undertakings. All was arranged and audited, as if it were public funds, with the minutest accuracy. Part of it I earned myself, to be sure, and contributed willingly out of my own abundance, for Mortimer and Co. has always been a paying business. But part of it came from Russia—

poor, bleeding Russia—from trusty friends of the Cause in Petersburg or Moscow; and for that guarantees were both given and exacted. Three persons, besides myself, know on whom the fund was spent. One of them is in Paris; the two others are in Russia.'

'And do they alone know of your plans?' Owen asked, in breathless suspense, from the sofa where he lay.

'Not they alone. No; many subscribers to our circle know the main outline of the facts; they know we were bringing up a young man in England—Sergius Selistoff's son—to follow in his father's footsteps as a martyr to Russia. More than that—they know also that Sergius Selistoff's son was to obtain some post in a foreign capital whence he might strike a great blow at the curse of Russia. But what they don't know'—and Mr. Hayward lowered his voice confidentially—'what they don't know is this—the assumed name and present address of Sergius

Selistoff's son, for whom they have done so much, and from whom they expect such marvels. Three people alone, besides myself and you two, knew that secret till lately; four know it now: Madame Mireff is one of them; the others, of course, are wholly unknown, even by name and fame, to you.'

'Madame Mireff is a friend!' Ionê exclaimed, with womanly instinct.

'Perhaps so. Who knows?' Mr. Hayward answered, bowing his head in a sudden access of shame. 'If *I* have fallen away, who may not fall away, for personal motives, from poor helpless Russia? But the other three hold each in his possession a sealed envelope. That sealed envelope contains his orders. It is to be opened, in each case, on either of two contingencies—my death, or if for three months the holders receive no communication on the subject of the fund from me. And if I myself fail to show them in three months from this time that Sergius Selistoff's son is in

a fair way to follow out the teachings I have bestowed upon him—then the holders of those three envelopes are bound by solemn oath never to rest in their beds till they've taken vengeance on the traitor—on you, Owen Cazalet.'

There was a silence in the room. Mr. Hayward still bent his head. Then, at last, as with a burst of inspiration, Ionê spoke.

'Can't you get those envelopes back?' she asked. 'Can't . . . the Russian police . . . since Owen won't act . . . help you to get them back again?'

The two men, in their utter horror, started unanimously from their seats and gazed at one another, speechless. Owen was the first to find words.

'What! betray them,' he cried, 'for one's own base life, to the spies of the Czar—these men who have befriended me! Save one's neck by handing them over to the mines of

Siberia! Oh, Ionê, you can't have realized what your words really mean. Better death, ten thousand times over—an honest man's death—than such perfidy as that! I can die if I must; but sell my comrades—never!'

Mr. Hayward laid his hand on the younger man's shoulder. His face was flushed with pride.

'Owen, my boy,' he said gravely, 'I see you haven't forgotten quite all that I taught you. I've a plan of my own, though, far better than Ionê's. No treachery; no apostasy. I shall try what I can do with the holders of those envelopes. I mean to preserve you, if it's possible to preserve you without treason to the Cause. You know yourself, if our men were once well on your track, no power on earth could save your life. All the strength of the Empire didn't avail to save Alexander Nicolaievitch. But I shall go off myself at once, first to Paris, then to Kieff, then to Moscow and Petersburg. I'll see

these three men; I'll endeavour to get from them those incriminating documents. No human soul but ourselves shall ever know who was Sergius Selistoff's son. If I die for it myself, I shall get the sealed orders back from them.'

Owen seized his friend's arm.

'To Kieff—to Moscow!' he cried, aghast, knowing well what the words meant. 'You won't surely expose yourself? No, no! Not in Russia.'

'Yes, in Russia,' Mr. Hayward answered, with a calmly dogged face. 'For twenty years I've avoided my country for my country's sake. I had hoped so to save her. Now those hopes are all wrecked; for *your* sake I'll revisit her. I'll not rest, day or night, till I've got the papers back again. . . . No, don't try to stop me. To Russia I'll go, Owen, though all the spies in Petersburg should know I was going there, though all the devils in hell should conspire to prevent me.'

Again there was a pause.

Then Mr. Hayward spoke once more.

'I brought you into this scrape,' he said, 'and I must see you well out of it, if that's still possible. Owen, my boy, I admit I did wrong. You were a child when I made this bargain on your account. Now you're a man, and can see what it all means, and know how to choose for yourself, you've a right to back out of it. Even if I give up my life to release you from the bargain you never wittingly made, it may be of no avail. But I *will* give it up, if need be. I'll do my best to protect you.'

Owen took his hand warmly.

'Dear, dear Mr. Hayward,' he said, with profound emotion, 'don't trust yourself in Russia on my account, I beg of you. I'd rather let this fate hang over me, whatever it may be, than think for a moment you should so risk and expose yourself.'

But he had to reckon with a woman as well.

Ionê rose passionately, and flung herself upon Mr. Hayward's neck. Then she spoke out with tremulous haste.

'No, no, Mr. Hayward,' she cried, quivering, and clinging to him in her earnestness. 'You owe it to him. It's your duty. I, who love him, ask you to go. You owe it to me, too. He's mine more than yours. You admit you did wrong. You must be just, then, and protect him.'

Mr. Hayward, unwinding her arms, took her hand in his own, still grasping Owen's with the other one.

'Yes, I'll go, my children,' he answered. 'My life's wrecked. I have but one hope, one wish on earth now—to make you two happy.'

'And while you're gone,' Owen said gravely, 'I, too, shall have a task to perform —to set about earning my own livelihood, at last, and repaying the Cause all I owe to Russia.'

Mr. Hayward was just about to answer something, when a ring at the bell roused Ionê automatically.

As housemaid of the flat, she rushed out to answer it.

'A telegram for you, Mr. Hayward,' she said, returning.

He tore it open on the spot and read it eagerly.

'Just arrived across the German frontier. Couldn't communicate before. Am returning now post-haste to England. Very serious news. Ossinsky arrested ten days ago at Kieff. All is known, except the English name of Sergius Selistoff's son. That they can't find out; but the danger is great. Smuggle him away at once, for heaven's sake.

'Olga Mireff.'

Mr. Hayward handed it across to them without one word of comment.

Ionė looked blankly at it, while Owen read aloud the secret cipher.

Mr. Hayward stood awestruck. As soon as they'd finished, he said but a few words, with blanched and trembling lips.

'I must go this evening. . . . Ossinsky was one of them!'

'To Moscow?' Owen asked.

'No; first of all to Paris. Once I get to Russia, I may never come back again; so I must settle Paris first. But there's no time to be lost. I'll telegraph to Olga to await me in Berlin, and I'll start for Paris this very evening.'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

True to his word, Mr. Hayward left that evening by the night mail for Paris. As soon as he was gone, a blank fell upon the party. After the cumulative excitement of the last few weeks, it seemed almost impossible for them to settle down once more to the humdrum routine of every-day life—the 'domestic round of roast and boiled,' as Blackbird loved to call it. Conversation languished; platitudes failed; common events seemed tame; even Ionê's bright heart felt the lack of some more pressing stimulus. They had grown accustomed to the feverish suspense of

Nihilistic life; this long waiting for news from Paris, Kieff, or Moscow struck them as dull and monotonous after those pungent episodes of the lasher and the sealed envelopes. Only the doubt as to the future kept them on the *qui vive* now; would Mr. Hayward succeed or fail in his momentous enterprise?—that was the question.

Meanwhile, however, Owen began to realize still more definitely and clearly than ever that he ought to be doing something for his own livelihood. It was impossible he could any longer depend upon Mr. Hayward; still more impossible that he could draw further on Aunt Julia's scanty private income. So he settled down for the time in Sacha's rooms, intent on the favourite and indispensable operation of looking about him. But looking about one, though a very good occupation in its way as a change from overwork, is a mode of life that soon wearies and sates a vigorous young intelligence.

Owen found it unsatisfactory in the very first week, and longed for some more active and remunerative employment. Yet he might have gone on indefinitely looking about him all in vain for months together—so thronged with suitors is every gate in London—but for an accident that occurred a few days later to Trevor Gardener.

They were sitting one afternoon in the drawing-room of the flat, Ionê and Owen, very absorbed and moody, thinking over the chances of Mr. Hayward's mission and the reason of his silence—Sacha working away at 'cooking' a sketch, Blackbird hanging over the piano and trying a chord or two at a time in the throes of composition—when a latchkey turned quickly in the front-door of the suite, and Trevor Gardener looked in, deadly white and terrified.

'Is Sacha here?' he asked, holding the door ajar. 'I beg your pardon for coming like this, but I want to speak with her.'

Sacha rose, and gave him her hand.

'Come into the studio,' she said, trembling suddenly. And Trevor Gardener followed her.

As they reached the room, he shut the door, and looked at her, fixed and white.

'Oh, Sacha,' he said abruptly, taking her hand in his own, 'how lucky it was, the other day, after all, you didn't accept me!'

'Why so?' Sacha asked, glancing up into his face trustfully, and letting her hand lie in his, for she had learned by this time to love him with all her heart. 'Oh, Trevor, what's the matter? Something dreadful has happened.'

'No, nothing very dreadful,' the young man answered, with blanched lips that belied his words. 'At least, not when you're accustomed to it.'

'But why lucky?'

'Well, Sacha, just for this excellent reason —and I'm so thankful you said *no* to me.

Because if you'd said *yes*, you'd have accepted a beggar.'

Sacha laid one soothing hand on his shoulder and smiled. Yes, positively smiled. Such a thing it is to be born a Russian, or half one. Those people have no idea of the importance of money.

'Something gone wrong in the City?' she asked, almost pleased, as it seemed to him.

Trevor Gardener winced and nodded.

'Yes, something gone wrong,' he said; 'no, everything gone wrong, rather. And so terribly—so terribly. You could never understand it. My partner, Wilson—oh, Sacha, such a blow! not for myself, I don't mean—not for myself, of course, but for our clients who trusted us!'

'What has he done?' Sacha asked, with a strange feeling in her throat which was certainly not altogether either sympathy or sorrow.

'Done?' he answered, gasping. 'What's

he done? Why, everything. What's he not done's more like it. Embezzled, mismanaged, over-speculated, gambled, falsified accounts, stolen clients' money, invented imaginary stocks for country clergymen and confiding old ladies, committed every crime a rascally partner could possibly be guilty of. It only came out this morning. And now he's gone away, leaving a note behind to tell me he means to cut his own throat, and shuffling upon *me* the responsibility of meeting the firm's engagements.'

'Has he any private means?' Sacha asked, anxious to know the worst at once.

'Not a penny, as far as I can learn. He's gambled away everything. All his own stocks are gone, and his wife's and his father-in-law's. As for his house at Wimbledon, that's a drop in the bucket. I haven't realized the full extent of his defalcations as yet. But at the very best—and fresh things are turning up every minute—my capital and

investments must go to cover it, and even then the firm will be hopelessly bankrupt. Ten shillings in the pound will be the outside dividend.'

Sacha gazed at him undismayed.

'Then, you're a poor man now, Trevor,' she cried, flushing crimson. 'You haven't a penny to bless yourself with.'

'Not a penny to bless myself with,' Trevor responded grimly.

In a tumult of passionate joy, Sacha flung her arms round his neck.

'Dear Trevor!' she murmured very low. 'Then, at last I may love you!'

'May love me?' Trevor echoed, amazed.

'Yes, and marry you now, Trevor.'

She said it tenderly, joyfully, with deep earnestness in her quivering voice.

Trevor gazed at her and sighed. She was a wonderful woman.

'But why now, if not before, Sacha?' he asked, all bewildered.

To him, good, solid, sober-minded, commercial Englishman, this blow had seemed like a death-knell of all his hopes in life. He had been thankful for one thing only—that Sacha hadn't accepted him.

But Sacha, for her part, still clinging to him in her joy, said firmly and resolutely :

'Before, you were rich, dear; and I wouldn't marry a rich man, on whom I must be dependent. Now you're poor—oh, so poor ; why, much poorer than myself—and I can marry you to-morrow with no loss of my pride : for I'm making a bigger income every month of late, Trevor ; and if you can put up with small things, why, we'll marry at once, and you may begin life over again.'

The young man started back in dismay.

'Oh no, darling !' he cried, astonished. 'How could I ever do that ? I'm a man ; you're a woman. You said to me that day on the downs at Moor Hill you wouldn't marry anyone who was richer than yourself,

because you didn't want to be like the women who sell themselves for the pittance of a livelihood. Your creed was the perfect equality of the sexes, and you wouldn't go back upon it. Well, then, if you, who are a woman, couldn't be dependent upon a man, how can I, who am a man, be dependent upon a woman?'

He said it manfully, honestly, with big open eyes. Sacha paused a moment and reflected; his argument caught her napping. She drummed her fingers on the table to assist her thought. At first hearing, this certainly sounded like a genuine dilemma. Yet she knew it wasn't insuperable. Then slowly, by degrees, she felt her way out of it.

'No, it's not quite the same,' she said in her deliberate, logical fashion. 'The cases aren't parallel; and I'll tell you the difference. Women till now have all been naturally dependent upon men; it's been

taken for granted they must be paupers and hangers-on. And each of them has been dependent upon a particular man—his slave and his chattel. That's a system I hate, and I don't want to perpetuate it. Therefore I stood out against marrying a man much richer than myself—even though I loved him—beside whose wealth my little earnings would be as nothing in the family. That was my womanly pride. It's quite different with men. They've no inequality to redress, no principle to vindicate. If a woman can help them at a pinch to re-establish their fortunes, why not avail themselves of the chance, and make her happy?'

She looked up into his face, a tender look, with those great trustful eyes of hers, as she said the last words. In spite of bankruptcy and ruin, Trevor Gardener thrilled through and through at her touch as she raised his hand to her lips, and laid her head, all unbidden, in the hollow of his shoulder.

'Trevor,' she murmured once more, very low and soft, 'you were ready to marry me when you were rich and successful and could have given me everything that heart can desire. See—I ask you myself to-day—won't you marry me now you're poor and distressed and disheartened, and let me fight the battle of life with you for your help and comfort ?'

It wasn't in human nature that Trevor Gardener at such words shouldn't bend down, enraptured, to kiss those liquid eyes, swimming with rare tears, and those thoughtful thin lips, held appealingly up towards him.

'Sacha darling,' he said with a burst, smoothing her hair with his hand, 'if for a moment I say *no* to you, trust me, it isn't that I love you less—it's that I respect you more. I can't bear to be a drag upon you, to make you share my poverty. I wanted to marry you that I might find you such luxuries and let you live in such comfort. But now I

should only hinder you. And I can't bear to say *yes* to you—though you ask me so sweetly.'

'You *shall* say *yes*,' Sacha answered with fervour, all the latent passion and earnestness of her half-Russian nature coming out in full force at this faltering opposition. 'I love you, Trevor, I love you, and you *shall* say *yes* to me. I want to fight this battle with you; I want to retrieve this loss; I want to be of use to you—a pillar, a staff, a prop, to help you. Money! Why, darling, when you were rich I couldn't bear to take you, among other things, because I don't know whether it's right for some of us to have so much, when others have so little. I was shocked and afraid when you told me how many thousands you made a year. But if you're poor now, I want you, I long for you, I ask you, I must have you!' She flung her arms wildly round his neck once more, and burst into a sudden flood of fiercely passionate tears.

He could hardly believe this was Sacha. The pent-up emotion of months found full vent all at once. 'Oh. promise me you'll take me, darling!' she cried, clinging to him with all her soul. 'Promise me—promise me you'll take me—you'll marry me!'

Trevor Gardener was a man; and men usually find it difficult to say *no* to anything when a woman asks them outright for it. And, besides, he loved her. He loved and admired her with all his heart and soul. Yet even so, he tried hard for a moment to stand out, for manly dignity's sake.

'When this bankruptcy's arranged,' he said feebly, pressing her to his breast—a bad moment for negotiations. 'When . . . I've retrieved my position a bit, Sacha. When I can earn an income.'

'No, now,' Sacha cried fervently—that placid Sacha—flinging herself upon him at last with the utter self-abandonment of a good woman in a crisis that demands it. 'Now at

once, just as things stand. You must! You shall, Trevor! To show my confidence in you, your trust in me! Not a day must we wait! To-morrow! To-morrow!'

It was some minutes before they went back to the others in the drawing-room. When they did so, Sacha's dignified face was flushed and red with not unbecoming blushes, and she wore in her breast a single drooping gardenia, the very last gardenia Trevor Gardener was ever to buy for his own adornment. As she entered the room, both Ionê and Blackbird noticed the unwonted token, and glanced at it significantly with inquiring eyes.

'What does it mean?' Sacha said, interpreting their unspoken thoughts aright, and answering them frankly. 'It means that dear Trevor's been ruined by his partner's dishonesty—and that, therefore, there's no reason why he and I shouldn't be married as soon as ever we can get the banns published.'

CHAPTER XL.

'GOOD-BYE—FOR EVER!'

A BANKRUPTCY's a long and weary business, and before Trevor Gardener was well out of the wood a good many things had had time to happen.

Among others, a day or two later, a short note came for Owen, in cipher, from Mr. Hayward at Paris. It said simply this:

'With great difficulty, my dear boy, I've succeeded in recovering the first of the sealed envelopes from my trusted friend over here, but only, I'm sorry to say, by a transparent ruse, which he resents intensely. This may greatly embarrass us. He knows or guesses

from my action that Sergius Selistoff's son must have refused his trust or gone back upon his bargain, and that I'm trying now to cover his retreat by counteracting my own most elaborate precautions. My fear is, therefore, that he may write to my other friend at Moscow, to warn him of my defection; in which case the envelope may, perhaps, be opened before I reach there. If so, my boy—I can't conceal the facts from you—you are simply doomed. But I will hope for the best. Give my love to Ionê. I start, if possible, for Russia to-morrow. These may be the very last lines you will ever receive from your affectionate and penitent friend and guardian,

'LAMBERT HAYWARD.'

Owen received this letter with very mingled feelings. It was satisfactory as far as it went, no doubt, that one more chance of Nihilist revenge should be curtailed or destroyed; but,

on the other hand, the deep sense of being a traitor to the Cause itself, and of having induced even Mr. Hayward to turn traitor too, sat heavily upon him. His one consolation lay in the thought that Ionê was pleased, and that she felt perfect confidence in Mr. Hayward's powers to prevent further mischief when once he got to Russia.

Even before Trevor Gardener's bankruptcy, however, had been finally disposed of, it was fully settled that the penniless stockbroker was to marry Sacha at once, and after their marriage he and Owen were to start a new business together—at first in Owen's name alone, on a scheme that Sacha had long been turning over in her head—a co-operative picture-dealer's, for selling works of art on joint terms with the artists. Sacha was prepared out of her little savings to find at once the preliminary capital; and as rooms were obtained in connection with Mr. Hayward's premises in Bond Street, they had good hopes

at the start of a successful venture. Sacha had a large acquaintance among painters, both men and women, and chose with care the co-operators who were to share their attempt. Trevor Gardener, on the other hand, had a large acquaintance among the picture-buying class, whom he could influence by his judgment; while Owen's striking appearance and fame as an athlete might attract from the outset, they hoped, out of pure curiosity, a certain amount of custom. Nor, as a matter of fact, were they disappointed. This is an age of well-bred commercial ventures. The business from the very first was a decided success; and before many months were over, when Trevor's affairs were settled, they found themselves already making a tolerable profit.

Nor did Trevor's affairs turn out quite so black in the end as he at first had feared. True, the assets didn't cover more than sixteen shillings in the pound; but that was

better than the ten of his earliest calculations; and when all was over, the ruined man made up his mind bravely to begin life over again, and work hard for rehabilitation till he could return his creditors in full the deficit caused by his partner's dishonesty. Meanwhile, he and Sacha were married, after all, and took up their abode together in a flat off Victoria Street.

Not so long after, it occurred casually to Henley Stokes one morning at Pump Court to stroll round once more for a further appeal to Blackbird's feelings. This shilly-shallying irked him. If marriages were to be the order of the day in the phalanstery of the flat—hang it all!—why shouldn't he, too, bear his part in the modest pageant? So, dressing himself very spick and span in his best frock-coat, with the usual orchid neatly pinned in his buttonhole, he sallied forth to Victoria Street, determined this time that Blackbird should explain herself and the mysterious

reason why, though she loved him, she wouldn't marry him. He would be put off with no subterfuges; he must get at the very core of his lady-love's objection.

His touch at the electric bell was answered, as usual, by Ionê, all in her morning dress.

'Is Blackbird at home?' the young man asked eagerly.

'Well, yes,' Ionê admitted, in somewhat dubious tones. 'But I don't quite know whether she'll see you or not. To tell you the truth, Henley, just of late Blackbird's been down—in very bad spirits.'

'What about?' Henley asked, with a most commiserating face.

'Oh, I can't say, I'm sure!' Ionê answered, not *quite* so sympathetically as Henley Stokes could have wished. 'It's a way she has, sometimes. Blackbird wouldn't be happy, don't you know, if she wasn't miserable.'

This was paradoxical, but true; and Henley admitted its force.

'There are no fresh laurel-leaves just now, you see,' he said, musing slowly to himself. 'I always thought, Ionê, Blackbird was never so well pleased or so comforted in soul as when she was busy making those investigations on laurel-leaves and the infusions she got out of them.'

Ionê was less interested in the subject than the young man from Pump Court. She led the way listlessly into Blackbird's laboratory.

'Here's Henley!' she said, with a brusque opening of the door. Blackbird gave a little start, and popped a bottle she was fingering into the cupboard at once in a somewhat flurried manner. But she stepped forward, flushing up rather more than was her wont.

'Oh, how kind of you to come round!' she said, taking his hand and trembling.

Henley Stokes seated himself, and drew his chair near hers. For awhile he talked nervously about various general subjects, screwing up courage all the time for the

final plunge. At last, when Blackbird unconsciously gave him a good lead for the remark, he went on wistfully :

'Well, that was just what I came round about to-day, do you know. You remember, Blackbird, that morning last summer when I —when I spoke to you so, and you were so very, very kind to me'—Blackbird nodded petulantly—'you remember, you said we could never be engaged? Well, I've come round to-day to ask you plainly *why?* I'll take no excuse. You *must* answer me, Blackbird ; I won't go away till you've answered me.'

As he said those words, Blackbird clenched her thin fingers hard and drove the nails into her palm. Then she looked up at him almost defiantly.

'Oh, Henley!' she cried, holding her breath, and half closing her big black eyes, 'I thought I told you then it was impossible —impossible. Why do you want to re-open

it? All these times, ever since, when I've seen you from day to day, it's been so sweet to me to think you really cared for me, that I've gone on clinging to life—clinging to life in spite of myself. I thought you loved me too well to go worrying me with love. Don't spoil it all now by asking such horrid questions!'

The young man bent over her tenderly. He couldn't understand her, but indeed he loved her! How sweet and frail she looked! like some delicate piece of fine Dresden china.

'But I can't help it, darling!' he murmured, dropping his voice quite low, and looking deep into her dark eyes through the fringe of half-closed lashes. 'All these times, as you say, I've put it off and off, waiting anxiously from day to day, fearing I might vex you again; till, now Sacha and Trevor are married, I keep saying to my own heart—Why not, then, just as well myself and Blackbird?'

The words fell like a match on a heap of gunpowder. Blackbird opened her eyes suddenly, and fronted him with the face of one possessed. Her access of energy frightened him.

'Married!' she cried, flashing fire at him from both those glowing eyes. 'Married! Married! Married! Oh, Henley! I wonder *you*, who know and love me so well—for I'm *sure* you love me—I wonder you don't see for yourself the reason *why* I can't be married! If you knew how you were torturing me! If you knew how you were killing me! It's agony! agony! But there! you're a man—strong, virile, robust; how should you ever be able to gauge and fathom the feelings of such a girl as I am?'

'Then, you'll never marry me, Blackbird?' Henley cried, taken aback, but lifting her hand to his lips none the less, and pressing it there tenderly.

Blackbird accepted the caress with passive

acquiescence. Nay more, she loved it. It was sweet to her to be loved. It made her tingle with pleasure. But for all that, she drew back as she answered passionately:

'No, never, never, never! . . . And that's not all. Worse than that. You've broken my dream now. For days I've been expecting it. For days I've been dreading it. Now the thunderbolt has fallen. I was happy while you were merely content to love me. But when you talk of marriage—Henley, the bubble's burst. I can only sleep away. My life's gone from me.'

She was terribly agitated.

'What do you mean?' the young man cried, pressing her hand still harder. 'Oh, Blackbird, Blackbird, don't dismiss me without telling me at least the reason.'

Blackbird stood up and faced him. She was deadly pale by this time, and her lips trembled violently. 'I will tell you the reason,' she answered, with a terrible forced

calm. 'I can't keep it from you any longer. I must out with it or die. I will tell you the reason. Henley, you're a man, and you love me as a woman. But will you have the truth? I'm not a woman at all—not a woman in the sense you mean—not a woman to be loved as a man wants to love her. I'm only a little girl grown up, that's all; in brain and mind and intelligence a woman, but in body a child, no more fit to love or be loved in the way you think than a four-year-old baby. If I love at all it's with my brain, not with my heart or my body. . . . When you talk to me like a man—even you, who are so gentle and so patient and so kind—you simply frighten me. I haven't got the instincts Ionê and Sacha have. . . . How could it be else? Listen, here, dear Henley: I've thought of this day and night, till I know what I'm speaking of. All the woman that ever was in me, or ought to have been in me, has been educated out, crushed

and killed by teaching. It's all gone off in music, or mathematics, or chemistry, or Greek. The rest of you are creatures of flesh and blood. I'm not even as you are. I'm all brain and nerves. The flesh and blood are bred out of me. I've nothing left to love you with.'

'But you *do* love me!' Henley Stokes murmured low, looking at her still admiringly.

'Yes, I *love* you, my darling—I *love* you!' Blackbird cried, trembling all over with joy and grief, and holding both his hands in hers, and thrilling through to the finger-tips. 'I love you all I can, and I love you to love me. I've been happier these few months than ever in all my life before. For the first time I've been happy. I've known what joy meant. I've *lived*, instead of merely existing and learning. But all the time a black shadow has disturbed my happiness. I knew it must come to an end at last—before long. I knew I was deceiving you. . . . For you wanted

a woman to love and be loved by; and all you've got instead is an animated music-book —the leavings and relics of the higher education.'

Henley turned to her in a tremor of pity, and kissed her white lips. Just that once, in the exaltation of the moment, she allowed him. She almost imagined she could understand why women, real women, liked such strange caresses. The kiss coursed through and through her, rousing vague echoes in her limbs; but she felt it was wrong; she felt it was hopeless.

'There! there! that'll do!' she cried, breaking down half hysterically, and motioning him off with her hands. 'Don't ask me any more. Remember, this is final. I've been drilled and instructed from my childhood up till there's no power or spontaneity or life left in me. To love a man as he wants to be loved, you must have flesh and blood. I'm a spirit, that's all, in a casing of clothes.

A voice—and a tired one. The only thing left for me now is to close my eyes, if I can, and sleep on for ever. Close my eyes, and sleep away, and never wake up again. For having once known *this*, there's nothing more on earth for me.'

She let his hands drop short; then just once, with a sudden impulse, transcending her own nature, she bent forward, glowing hot, and kissed both his wistful eyes with an impassioned pressure.

'I know what they want!' she cried, 'those dear, dear eyes; and I never could give it them. Good-bye, good-bye, kind friend—the only man on earth I ever could love, the only man on earth who ever could love me! Good-bye—for ever!'

And with a quick burst of tears she rushed all at once from the room like a wounded creature, leaving Henley alone, amazed and discomfited.

CHAPTER XLI.

LAUREL-LEAVES.

'Some people, they tell me, are afraid of death. It was never so with me, dear Henley. It's life *I'm* afraid of. For awhile I endured it. I can endure it no longer. Good-night, loving heart! I hope I may sleep with no dreams to bother me.'

So Henley Stokes read next morning on a postcard, in a very firm hand. It was signed just 'Blackbird.' No more than those few words; but it made his heart sink. He looked at them and trembled. What could Blackbird mean by it?

Seizing his hat forthwith, he rushed out

into the Strand. There he hailed a passing hansom.

'Drive quick to Victoria Street!'

He rang the bell of the flat. Ionê opened the door, bright and smiling as usual. Henley's heart came up into his mouth at the sight for joy. Then all was well, after all! He pressed her hand hard. Blackbird had only been terrifying him. If anything had happened, Ionê could never look so gay and cheerful as that. The very light in her merry eyes reassured him immensely.

Still, it was in a broken voice that he stammered out the question:

'And Blackbird—how is she?'

'Blackbird?' Ionê answered, half alarmed at his gaiety. 'Well, you're so early this morning, you see. It isn't nine o'clock yet. I'm only the housemaid, of course, so it doesn't matter for me; but you can't expect the ladies of the house to be up and dressed, ready to receive visitors, at such an unearthly

hour. Besides, when Blackbird went to bed last night, she asked us not to call her—to let her sleep on. She felt as if she should get some rest at last, she said. She's been sleepless lately, and she didn't want us on any account to wake her up or disturb her.'

Henley Stokes's heart stood still within him once more at those ominous words.

'Some rest at last!' he cried, turning paler than ever, and grasping a chair in his horror. 'Some rest at last! Oh, Ionê, didn't you guess—didn't you know what she meant? We must wake her up at once! We must go into her room and try to rouse her!'

As he spoke, he put the postcard into Ionê's hand without one word of explanation. Ionê read it, and broke at once into a sudden little cry.

'Sacha, Sacha!' she burst out, hurrying terrified down the passage; 'we must force open the door! Oh, look at it! look at it!

Do you know what this means? Poor Blackbird has killed herself!'

In a moment, Owen and Sacha had rushed out into the passage, and stood together, all tremulous, in front of Blackbird's door. With one blow of his strong fist, Owen broke off the lock-fittings. It yielded instantly. They entered, hushed and awestruck—Owen first, then Henley Stokes, then Ionê and Sacha. As they did so, Owen started. Henley gave a sharp gasp, and stood still on the threshold.

Within, very motionless, Blackbird lay across the bed, in a simple black grenadine evening dress, her feet just touching the ground, her head thrown on one side, as if listless, on the pillow. She was sleeping soundly—at rest at last. Her face was very white. Her thin hands were bloodless.

Owen was the first to move forward, with the solemn step a death-room seems to call forth automatically; he gazed hard at the poor child as she lay there in her loneliness.

She was pallid, but peaceful. A little foam at the mouth, a slight blueness of the lips, were the sole signs of what had happened. Save for that, she looked merely as if she had fallen into a very deep sleep. He touched one hand reverently with inquiring fingers. It was cold as ice, but still soft and yielding.

By her side, on a little table, lay a corked bottle. Against it a piece of paper was conspicuously tilted :

'Don't touch, for heaven's sake. Prussic acid. Very poisonous. The fumes would kill.'

They looked at it appalled, without saying a word to one another. Sacha took Owen's hand in hers. They paused and gazed at the beautiful calm face, more beautiful now it was at rest at last than ever it had been during the weariness of living. Tears stole slowly down their cheeks. Not one of them needed to ask why Blackbird had killed herself. They knew very well already. The

wonder was rather why she hadn't done it long ago.

Weary, weary of a life that was a pain and a bitterness to her. Longing to be at rest. Too tired to do more than lie down and be well rid of it.

They stood there long in silence, gazing mutely at one another. Then Henley Stokes stepped forward, very solemnly and reverently, and kissed the white forehead once with a deep-drawn sigh. As he did so, he saw a little piece of paper lay crumpled up convulsively in the less conspicuous hand. He drew it forth half remorseful, as if afraid of disturbing poor Blackbird's peace. It was a twisted, wee note, inscribed in pencil, 'For Henley.'

He opened it, and read :

'Three o'clock, Wednesday morning.
'Just before taking the poison.

'DEAREST HENLEY,

'You have given me a few short months of the only happiness I ever knew in

my poor little life. But of course it couldn't last. I knew it was delusive. It grieves me to think I must requite you so ill by giving you in return so much needless sorrow.'

On the centre table was a longer letter in an envelope, addressed to Sacha. Owen handed it to her without a word. Sacha opened it and read. The rest looked over her shoulder and followed in silence.

'Twelve, midnight.

'DEAR, DEAR, GOOD SACHA,

'I write to you most of all, because I know you will best understand me. Henley understands me, too; but, then, Henley knows so much I needn't write to *him*. So I set down these few words for you, to be read at the inquest. I suppose there'll be an inquest. They won't even let a poor tired girl lie down to sleep when she chooses,

but they must drag her out publicly to ask why she lay down, and what she wanted rest for.

'*You* know I was tired, and how hard I found it to keep awake at all. *You* know how my life was a grief and a burden to me. What I wanted was just to put my hands behind my head and fling myself down on the soft sweet grass, with the warm sky above me, and the drowsy hum of the bees for a lullaby in my ear—to fall asleep then and there, and never, never wake up again! I couldn't do that; but I've done what I could. I've taken a sleeping-draught—or I mean soon to take it. It's a very sure and certain one. It acts instantaneously. I made it myself. It's called prussic acid.

'Sacha dear, I don't need to ask *you* to forgive me. You understand me so well you won't want explanations. But I'd like you to explain how it happened to the jury. *They* won't understand, of course, those

twelve dreadful men — stolid, thick-headed, commonplace. They'll say, "She was mad." Oh, Sacha, don't let them call me that. I'm so sensible, so logical. It would give me bad dreams in my bed under the green grass. Make them see I was just tired. So tired, so weary, it was unreasonable for me to do anything else on earth but fall asleep with fists clenched like a drowsy baby.

'For years I've done nothing but learn, learn, learn! I was worked from my babyhood. They said I was clever, and must develop my talents. When my talents were developed, there was nothing else left for me. The woman was dead; the brain alone remained. I could compose, I could sing, I could read and write and reason; but live or love or enjoy myself I couldn't.

'And I wanted to love. I wanted to be loved. Oh, I wanted it so badly; but don't tell them about *that*, dear. Don't read *that*

at the inquest. You and Henley can understand. For the rest of them, no matter.

'There was only one thing in life I had energy left for. I longed for sleep so much that I made my mind up months and months ago I *must* have a sleeping-draught. I read up about them all—all the draughts that make you sleep and never wake up again; most of them were slow, long, doubtful, ineffective. But I found there was one that never failed or hung fire. That one was prussic acid. I determined to get some and keep it by my side for use when I wanted it; but they wouldn't let me buy any. There's a conspiracy in England to keep people awake against their will, whether they're tired or not. You mayn't buy a sleeping-draught, even for use on the spot; so the only way left was for me to make it.

'That compelled me to learn chemistry. I learned it, and with a will. I was so

tired, but I could muster up energy enough and to spare, if it was to bring me my sleeping-draught. I worked away at it hard, and soon learnt the best plans for making prussic acid.

'Do you remember, all last summer, I was always messing about in the laboratory with laurel-leaves? Well, laurel-leaves contain amygdalin, and from amygdalin you can distil hydrocyanic acid—that's the chemical name of it. I might have made it from drugs, but this way was prettier. I distilled quite a lot—enough to put you all to sleep, if you feel too weary. But there! you have health, and strength, and flesh and blood to love with. You're not a ghost, like me. You're a real live woman.

'When you married it made me feel the difference more keenly then ever; and yesterday, when Henley asked *me* to marry him, I said to myself, "The end has come now. I can't stand it any longer, this mockery of

life. I won't live, a child, to be treated like a woman, when I know I'm a ghost, a phantom, a nullity. I won't spoil this dear man's life for him by standing in his way. I'll lie down and rest at last; I'll take my sleeping-draught."

'I meant to have taken it long ago, but one thing put me off. The little spark of womanhood that was still left within me after so much education flared up in a dying flicker when Henley was kind to me. It made me feel how delicious it must be to love and be loved. Even the vague little shadow of it I could clutch at and understand made life worth living for a few short months to me. Only, I knew I was wrong. I knew I was sacrificing that dear kind heart to a child's empty fancy. Yesterday, with a breath, the bubble burst; and I thought, for his sake, and for my own rest's sake, I must be done with it all now, and take my sleeping-draught.

'I shall take it at three o'clock, with a thought for you all. Good-bye, dear heart,

'Your affectionate

'BLACKBIRD.'

Henley flung himself in a chair and buried his face in his hands.

'Poor child, poor child!' he cried aloud. 'And to think I should have killed her!'

Sacha bent over the pale corpse with big tears in her eyes.

'Not you, not you, dear Henley,' she said, gazing at it; 'but her parents and teachers.'

And as she raised her eyes once more, they fell on the words Blackbird had painted round her room:

'Thou art more than the gods who number the days of our temporal breath,
For these give labour and slumber; but thou, Proserpina, death.'

CHAPTER XLII.

BAD MATERIAL.

On the Continent, meanwhile, Mr. Hayward's success had been partial and inconclusive.

The very morning of his arrival in Paris he went hastily round from his comfortable hotel in the Rue de la Paix to a shabby street on the south side, to get back, if possible, into his own hands the incriminating envelope which contained Owen Cazalet's name and address in England. For this purpose he meant to introduce himself at once to his brother Nihilist as Ruric Brassoff; for nobody on earth, save Madame Mireff alone, was aware of the identity of the exiled Prince with Mr. Lambert Hayward, senior partner

in the firm of Mortimer and Co., in Bond Street. Had others known it, needless to say, the identification of Owen with Sergius Selistoff the younger would have been very plain sailing. But Mr. Hayward, who did nothing by halves, had kept his English home and occupation discreetly concealed from the prying gaze of all his Nihilist allies; so he ran no risk now of implicating Owen by any other means than the sealed envelope.

Arrived at the Rue des Saints Pères, he climbed a high staircase *au cinquième*, with a beating heart, and knocking at a closed door, asked for Valerian Stefanovic.

He was shown at once into a barely-furnished *salon*. His fellow-conspirator rose from his seat by a table at the far end to receive him.

'I am Ruric Brassoff,' Mr. Hayward said simply as the door closed behind him.

Stefanovic, without altering one muscle of

his inscrutable face, bowed a non-committing bow.

The Chief was taken aback by so cool a reception. Middle-aged, wiry, suspicious, a lean and hungry man, with a moustache like Mephistopheles, this Valerian Stefanovic seemed the very embodiment of the calmly sardonic or calculating type of conspirator. Not at all the sort of person to be lightly moved, Mr. Hayward felt, by superficial blandishments. The Chief looked at him, and despaired. It was clear, if he was to succeed at all in his present undertaking, he must succeed, not by frankness, but by wile and stratagem.

It took him some time, of course, at the outset to persuade Stefanovic at all that he was really and truly Ruric Brassoff. Appearances were against him. The sardonic conspirator for some minutes stood entirely on the defensive, frankly incredulous. But even after this initial difficulty had been in part

overcome, there remained the far harder task of inducing his ally to give up the all-important letter.

In despair of fair means, Mr. Hayward after a time began to feign distrust on his own side, and to doubt about the safety of the precious sealed envelope. Thus put upon his mettle, Stefanovic, after some brief parleying, produced the challenged document from a little locked drawer, and held it out cautiously before his visitor's eye, with his own two hands still carefully guarding it.

Mr. Hayward scanned him close. He was a lithe, thin man—no match for a Brassoff physically. Quick as lightning, without a word spoken, the Nihilist Chief pounced down upon him unawares, and, seizing both wrists in his own, wrenched them rapidly round till the envelope dropped from Stefanovic's grasp. Then, stooping down before the man had recovered from his pain and surprise, he picked it up in haste and tore it open. The seal was

intact; so far, good; the envelope, then, had not been tampered with.

A good fire burned bright in the open grate of the little *salon*. Without a second's hesitation, Mr. Hayward flung the incriminating paper with Owen's name and address into the midst of the flame. It blazed up instantly, burnt to white ash in a moment, and then flew up the chimney, a thin and twinkling sheet of spark-bespangled tissue.

With a wild shout, Stefanovic, half wondering, half comprehending what had happened, sprang forward in a fury, and fronted his chief, hot and trembling.

'This is treachery!' he cried aloud, with a very red face. 'Treachery! Treason! Chicanery! You could have no good ground for such trickery as that! Not from Ruric Brassoff himself will I stand this treatment. And you are *not* Ruric Brassoff. You're a spy of the Czar's.' He snatched a revolver hurriedly from a cabinet by his side, and

cocked it point-blank at him. 'Pretender!' he shrieked in his impotent rage. 'Liar! Hypocrite! *Mouchard!*'

Quick as thought, Mr. Hayward drew a revolver in turn—a mere toy of a weapon to look at, but perfectly finished and fitted throughout, a fine triumph of workmanship. He pulled it from his pocket and covered his man with it in his right; with his left he dashed back Stefanovic's clumsier pistol.

'Hold, hold, my friend,' he said shortly, clasping the man's delicate wrist with that iron grip of his. 'If you struggle, I shoot. I'm your superior officer. It is not for such as you to judge of my acts and my orders. The Society as a whole has alone the right to judge of them. If you fire, you spoil all. You bring everything to light. You explode the fraternity. Take time to consider. This is a critical point in our history. Hunt me down, if you will, after due deliberation. But if you shoot me now, in hot blood, what,

I ask, will you have accomplished? All Paris and Petersburg will know to-morrow that Valerian Stefanovic has shot Ruric Brassoff, the tyrant's chief enemy, in a private quarrel. Then everything would come out. The Cause would be betrayed. Poor Russia would be lost. And Alexis Selistoff would have good reason to laugh in his sleeve in his comfortable office in the Third Section.'

Awed by that strong, calm voice, Stefanovic paused and hesitated. He looked at his man dubiously.

Mr. Hayward still held the tiny revolver pointed straight at his follower's head. As Stefanovic doubted, his Chief, edging forward, gave once more a sudden curl to his wrist, wrenched the revolver from his grasp with that powerful grip as of a Cossack hand, and flung it with a sweep to the other side of the little *salon*. It alighted harmlessly. Then, still covering his man cautiously with his own

toy-like weapon, he went on in a quieter voice :

'Valerian Stefanovic, don't venture to bandy words or dispute my orders. I am still your commander. But things have turned out differently from my expectations. I don't trust you so implicitly now as I trusted you some months ago. You must accept your position, or blow everything to atoms. We are standing this moment on the edge of a volcano. A brawl between you and me in a Paris lodging-house would be fatal to the Cause. You must see that for yourself. Don't insist upon this folly.'

Stefanovic, undecided, fell back into an easy-chair, and glared at him sullenly.

'I don't know who you are,' he muttered low, with lurking anger in his voice. 'I'm not sure my plain duty isn't to leap at your throat and choke you.'

By this time Mr. Hayward had regained all his natural calmness.

'You're not sure,' he answered with resolution. 'And where you're not sure, Valerian Stefanovic, the wise man's obvious course is, not to be precipitate, but to wait and take counsel. Will you, on your sole responsibility, wreck a whole organization? Will you destroy your country? Pause and think at least before you do it. And remember, the man who bids you pause and think is the Chief of the Revolution—Ruric Brassoff.'

Stefanovic rocked himself up and down in the chair, as regardless of the pistol whose muzzle the elder man still held pointed at his temples as if it had been a child's popgun.

'Well, Ruric Brassoff,' he murmured slowly at last, 'if Ruric Brassoff you *are*, I believe you to be a traitor. But I'll pause and reflect, as you say, for I recognise in your hand the one that so long has issued me orders. Still, I won't let the Cause suffer by my own uncertainty. I give you fair warning, I shall write to our friends in Petersburg and Moscow

to inform them of this incident. I'll tell them exactly by what *ruse* you cheated me. It will be for them to decide. If *they* think as I think, then'—he rose as he spoke, and faced the revolver fearlessly—'then, Ruric Brassoff,' he said, pointing at him with one skinny finger, like embodied Fate, 'your brains will be scattered on the floor with as little compunction as you'd scatter mine this minute if I refused to obey you.'

Mr. Hayward let the revolver drop slightly as he answered in a very quiet tone :

'That's well, friend Stefanovic—very well, very sensible. You speak now with the voice of a good revolutionist. *Death to the traitor* is the law of our being, the bond of our society. On no other basis can a conspiracy defend itself against internal treason. I accept it myself; kill me if I prove false ; but I don't want to die till I've done the work that still remains for me. And I like you all the better and trust you all the more for the bold, frank

way you've spoken to-day to me. If you'd shot me—well and good—you'd have committed an error of judgment; but I confess you would have been right in the main impulse that prompted you.'

He hated himself for his duplicity and backsliding as he said it. On his own code of ethics he knew Stefanovic was right, and he himself was wrong. He admired the man for his courage, his steadfastness, his devotion. This was the true Nihilist strain. This was an ally to be proud of. The revolutionist within him recognised and rejoiced in a brother soul.

'Well done,' he said, after a short pause. 'You did right, friend Valerian.'

But the other man sat down again, undisarmed in soul, and confronted him once more with a steely eye of suspicion.

'That's all very well in its way,' he said sulkily; 'but I wish I'd shot, all the same. Stone dead has no fellow. However, to pre-

vent open scandal I waive that point. Only, mind you, Ruric Brassoff, or whoever else you may be, you shall not play this trick again with impunity elsewhere. I shall write to all the heads of our organization in Russia to warn them at once of your vile plan of action. You won't get any more sealed envelopes by treachery, I can promise you. I shall write to each one of them—Ossinsky, Fomenko, Clemens, Lisogub, everybody! They shall know how to deal with you when you present yourself before them.'

A danger-signal loomed distinct before Mr. Hayward's inner eye—a double danger. True Nihilist that he was still, in spite of this episode, he didn't want to betray his Cause to the Third Section. And in his burning anxiety for Owen Cazalet's safety, he didn't want young Sergius Selistoff's alias and address to fall into his Uncle Alexis's hands at St. Petersburg. But unless Stefanovic would be warned in time, that might easily happen.

For he might write, among others, to Ossinsky of Kieff, whom the police, as Madame Mireff wired to him, had lately arrested.

With genuine alarm and interest gleaming bright in his eye, he leaned eagerly forward.

'Take care what you do,' he said, in a voice of solemn warning. 'Whoever else you write to, don't write to Ossinsky. Our trusted friend was arrested at Kieff some ten days ago, as I learn by telegram from Olga Mireff. If you write to him, your letter will fall into the hands of the spies; and then all will be up with both of us—with the Cause—with Russia.'

'That's false!' Stefanovic answered, starting up and facing him with clenched fists, like a tiger at bay. 'That's false! You're a liar! If Ossinsky had been arrested I should have heard of it at once. Who would hear before me? You're trying to intimidate me. You're a spy—you're a *mouchard!*'

Mr. Hayward drew a telegram triumphantly

from his pocket, and handed it to the man with a smile. Stefanovic glanced at it sideways.

'Just arrived across the German frontier. Couldn't communicate before. Am returning now post-haste to England. Very serious news. Ossinsky arrested ten days ago at Kieff. All is known, except the English name of Sergius Selistoff's son. That they can't find out. But the danger is great. Smuggle him away at once, for heaven's sake.

'Olga Mireff.'

'You see,' Mr. Hayward said gravely, 'I have good reason for my action.'

But Valerian Stefanovic gazed at him fixedly with stern Machiavelian eyes as he answered, between his teeth, under his wiry moustache :

'This is false. This is forgery. This is

lies, and you know it. If it were true, Olga Mireff would have telegraphed to *me*. I'll be careful what I do. I'll compromise nobody. But, Ruric Brassoff or spy, I distrust you—I distrust you !'

CHAPTER XLIII.

TO MOSCOW.

It was with a heavy heart indeed that Mr. Hayward returned that morning to his comfortable hotel in the Rue de la Paix. For his chance of saving Owen and Ionê depended entirely upon the recovery, unopened, of the sealed envelopes. But the dangers in the way were now great and twofold. If Stefanovic wrote direct to Michael Fomenko at Moscow, that brother revolutionist would inform the whole Nihilist party in Russia and the West of their Chief's defection ; the envelope would be broken, its secret divulged, and no stone would be left unturned by the entire organization to punish Owen Cazalet for his

desertion of their common principles. And if, on the other hand, Stefanovic wrote direct to Ossinsky at Kieff, then the letter would inevitably fall into the hands of General Selistoff's spies, and Owen's life would be rendered doubly insecure by the hostility alike of the Revolutionists and of the Russian Government. Both parties at once would pursue him as a traitor with relentless energy.

What annoyed Mr. Hayward most, however, in this difficult crisis, was his inability to get at once to Berlin and Moscow. He was longing to go and to communicate with Olga Mireff, who might be able, he hoped, either to intervene on his behalf with Valerian Stefanovic, or to prevent the man's letters ever reaching Kieff and so being seized *en route* by the representatives of the Third Section. Madame Mireff's peculiar position as the supposed friend and ally of General Selistoff and the Czar made her aid especially desirable at such a juncture. Sharing, as she did, the

secrets of both sides, she was able from time to time to do the Cause good service which none but such a clever and resourceful diplomatist would have had the power to render it. But, unfortunately, on the very threshold, delays and difficulties arose over the question of passports. Mr. Hayward was determined to go to Russia, and brought with him for the purpose the usual perfunctory Foreign Office document, issued in the name of Henry Mortimer, a British subject — his former partner. It was necessary, however, to get the *visa* of the Russian embassy at Paris, and over this *visa* unexpected trouble cropped up, which it took Mr. Hayward two clear days to surmount, not to mention a certain sum of very hard swearing. The Nihilist Chief wasn't a man to fret and fume over trifles, but this inopportune delay caused him no small anxiety. For perhaps before he could reach Berlin Stefanovic's letters would be well on their way for Kieff and Moscow, and Owen's

fate would be sealed, either by Michael Fomenko or by Alexis Selistoff.

At last, however, all difficulties were smoothed away; hard swearing produced its due reward, the passport was correctly examined and *visé;* and Henry Mortimer, gentleman, a British subject, on his travels on the Continent, under the protection of all foreign princes, potentates, and powers, took the fast through train from the Gare du Nord for Berlin.

He went straight on arrival to the Continental, the big fashionable hotel opposite the Friedrichstrasse railway-station. Madame Mireff was there already, waiting for him by appointment. Mr. Hayward lost no time in seeing her, and explaining in part the object of his visit. Olga Mireff listened, all respectful attention. Not a shadow of mistrust disturbed her perfect confidence. For her, at least, it was clear, the Cause and the man were one; women can grasp the abstract only

through the aid of a concrete form; she had so implicit a belief in Ruric Brassoff that whatever he said was to her the embodied voice of all free Russia.

As for the Chief, he broke his plan to her by very tentative stages. Events had occurred, he said, as he told her in London, which rendered it impossible for Owen Cazalet, who was also, as she knew, Sergius Selistoff the younger, to enter the English diplomatic service. He wouldn't explain to her in full what those events were; he wouldn't defend his action; he was Ruric Brassoff; that, he hoped, would be enough for her. Olga Mireff could trust him. It had become necessary, however, as a consequence of this change of front, and of Ossinsky's arrest, that he should go to Russia in person, in order to recover possession of certain compromising papers which might otherwise cause both Owen and himself very serious trouble. And he was going there almost at once, direct to Moscow.

Madame Mireff gave a start.

'To Russia!' she cried. 'To Moscow! Oh, Ruric Brassoff, no! Let me go in your place. Don't expose your sacred head. Don't trust yourself in that country.'

Mr. Hayward lifted his hand, palm open before him, deprecatingly.

'Not that name, Olga—not that name,' he whispered low. 'Here I am Henry Mortimer, a British subject. But I must go, all the same. To Russia. To Moscow. No one on earth but myself could perform my business.'

'The risk's so great!' Madame cried, trembling with anxiety. 'In Russia you have everywhere to run the gauntlet of so much police espionage. Whereas, for me, all's made so easy. I've Alexis Selistoff's recommendation wherever I go. I've the weight of the aristocracy and the bureaucracy at my back. I have but to show my card, and the mere name, "Olga Mireff," is my

passport everywhere. Nobody thinks of questioning me. I'm the friend of the Administration.'

Mr. Hayward shook his head gravely.

'You're a faithful adherent, Olga,' he said, with that calm air of command that sat upon him so easily—'a most faithful adherent. But how often shall I have to tell you that your zeal at times outruns your discretion? I don't ask you for such aid. I ask for obedience. Listen well to what I say, and make no private suggestions.'

A little red spot burned fiery bright on Olga Mireff's cheek; but she gave no rebellious answer. Her reverence for Ruric Brassoff was too deep to permit it.

'I forgot,' she answered meekly. 'I rate your life so high that I can't bear, without a protest, to hear of your risking it, if any other of less value would answer as well. But you, of course, know best. I am all obedience.'

She bowed her head and blushed crimson. Mr. Hayward watched her close, as he went on to explain to her in tentative terms what he wished her to do, with the air of a general who issues orders to his attentive subordinates. She was to remain in Berlin for the present under her own name, and he would telegraph progress to her daily as Henry Mortimer. The telegram would bear reference to an imaginary illness of an imaginary son, and would mean merely that all was going well up-to-date—no danger expected. But if any day no telegram arrived before twelve o'clock noon, then she would know he was either arrested or in flight for his life. In that case she was to proceed by the first train to St. Petersburg, and to call at once on General Selistoff, so as to worm out the circumstances. She could make an excuse for her unexpected return by giving the General some unimportant unsigned intercepted letter from a London Nihilist, and pre-

tending to have discovered from it that Ruric Brassoff was in Russia. That would prove her watchfulness.

'And if I'm arrested and taken to Petersburg,' the Chief went on very solemnly, 'I shall no doubt be examined in Alexis Selistoff's office. Or perhaps he may come to Moscow to prevent removing me. Well, take care you're there; be cautious, be firm, and watch what I say, to govern yourself accordingly.'

Madame Mireff's lips twitched; but she answered, without any apparent qualm:

'Yes, I will. You can trust me.'

Mr. Hayward took slowly from his inner breast-pocket a little revolver of very fine workmanship. It was the same with which he had confronted Valerian Stefanovic in his rooms at Paris. He handed the pretty toy across to her—a marvel of modern skill, the final flower in the evolution of pocket firearms.

'Take this, Olga,' he said calmly. 'It's very precious. You can smuggle it across the frontier more easily than I can. You won't be searched. I may be. At any rate, take it. I may have need of it in Petersburg, if ever we meet there. It's a beautiful little instrument. Carry it about with you always in the bosom of your dress, wherever you go, for we can never tell beforehand at what minute it may be wanted.'

Madame Mireff took it reverently, raised his hand to her lips, and kissed it as she did so. Mr. Hayward accepted the kiss with all the dignity of a monarch. It was clear she was stanch; woman-like, she shone brightest in personal devotion. No qualms like Stefanovic's there; no doubts; no suspicions.

'I will,' she answered once more, still holding his hand in hers. 'Dear friend, I may not say your name aloud, it seems, but I utter it in my heart. I am yours, for Russia. I give you my body; I give you

my soul. Take me; do as you will with me.'

She looked at him with her great eyes. Mr. Hayward bowed silently. Then they talked on for some minutes more, the Chief giving directions in a most matter-of-fact voice — for he wouldn't give way — now Madame Mireff was to behave under certain contingencies, and Madame listening to them with the eagerness of a young girl to her lover. At last he turned to her suddenly, and asked in a different tone:

'And have you seen anything of our friends since you've been here in Berlin?'

'Very little; very few of them,' Madame answered, coming back to herself from a dreamy cloudland. 'Everybody here knows me as the Czar's agent in England, and I have to be careful accordingly; for the two or three faithful in Berlin and Charlottenburg are suspected by the police, and watched very closely. But I *did* just manage to have

a word or two in private with my cousin Tania to-day, and, by the way, Tania told me a piece of bad news, which this more important matter of yours half put out of my head for the moment, but which you certainly ought to know at once. It was about Ossinsky's arrest, or, rather, one of its consequences. Tania hadn't heard Ossinsky was taken; for some reason or other our friends at Kieff seemed afraid to write or telegraph to her, so she committed, quite unwittingly, a most unfortunate mistake. She sent on letters to Ossinsky, addressed to her here, which of course will fall now into the hands of Alexis Selistoff's myrmidons.'

Mr. Hayward gave a start of surprise and alarm.

'Letters to Ossinsky!' he exclaimed, taken aback. 'From whom and from where? This is serious indeed. Did she know their contents?'

Madame saw he was deeply moved.

'From Paris, I think,' she answered, trembling. 'From Valerian Stefanovic—so Tania told me. He wrote to her, urging her strongly to forward these letters, which he said were important, to Ossinsky at Kieff, and to Fomenko at Moscow. So she forwarded them at once by the usual channels. I don't know the contents, though. Stefanovic told Tania nothing more about them than that they were of immediate and pressing necessity.'

Mr. Hayward rose from his seat and paced up and down his room in a turmoil of doubt and fear—not for himself, but for Owen.

'This is terrible!' he cried at last. 'You can't think what she's done. Ossinsky's letters would, of course, be seized at Kieff. They would doubtless contain some allusion to the others Stefanovic had sent to Fomenko at Moscow. Fomenko would be arrested, too, and with him would be arrested most

damaging papers. But that's not all. Before he could be taken, he might do much harm. He might divulge to others a fundamental secret I wished kept most inviolable. He might ruin all; he might explode the whole mine. I must go on at once by the first train to Moscow.'

Madame Mireff started to her feet. The woman within her overcame her.

'No, no!' she cried, flinging her arms round him in a transport of terror. 'You mustn't! you mustn't! For Russia's sake, you must stop. Don't venture to go! Don't expose yourself to this danger!'

A deadly pallor spread over Ruric Brassoff's white face. For Russia's sake! What a mockery! when he was sacrificing Russia to Ionê and Owen. He unwound her arms slowly; he stood erect and immovable.

'For Russia's sake,' he said in a very cold, stern voice, for he was sentencing him-

self to death, 'I must go; I must give myself up—I must brave the unspeakable. For Russia's sake I must die. It's all I can do now for her.'

CHAPTER XLIV.

TRAPS FOR FOXES.

Alexis Selistoff sat in a very good humour in his cabinet at the Bureau of Police in St. Petersburg. 'Twas with evident gusto that the chief of the Third Section twirled the ends of his gray moustache between his big bronzed fingers. Tall, well set, erect, a great giant to look upon, with his commanding face and clear-cut classical features, Alexis Selistoff seemed the very picture of what Owen Cazalet might become after forty-five years of military service in Russia. To the towering height and colossal limbs of all his kin, he added the fine bearing and stern, methodical air of a well-trained soldier.

But in spite of his cheerful mien, a grim smile played round the corners of those cruel thin lips.

'This is good, Nikita,' he murmured musically to his chief clerk, in pleased and ruminating tones. 'We've run our vermin to earth at last! We shall cage them soon, now, these burrowing underground foxes!'

'Number Four still baffles us, though,' the chief clerk remarked pensively.

'Number Four still baffles us,' Alexis Selistoff echoed, with another twirl at the waxed gray ends; 'but the rest's all plain sailing. It was clear, even to start with, from Ossinsky's papers, that we have to deal here with a plot of that reptile Ruric Brassoff's. It was clear the ringleader had communicated some secret of prime importance to three other persons, and three others only. That secret, I take it for granted, had reference to this boy or young man, designated in their cipher as Number Five Hundred. Now,

Number Five Hundred, whoever he may be, is living in England. And there we can set Madame Mireff on the trail to catch him.'

'Has it ever occurred to your Excellency to consider,' the chief clerk ventured to suggest with very tentative hesitation, 'that Number Five Hundred might not impossibly be——'

With a terrible frown, Alexis Selistoff cut him short.

'Sir!' he thundered out, turning round upon him as a terrier turns on a wounded rat, and annihilating him with one glance from those formidable eyes of his. 'Keep your suggestions till they're asked for. How dare you presume to dictate? Don't forget your place. And be careful how you implicate members of important families.'

For though Alexis Selistoff didn't mind acknowledging (with a shudder) to Olga Mireff, a noblewoman born, and his own equal in rank, that his brother Sergius's son

was a possible traitor and Nihilist, he couldn't bring himself to endure that a mere departmental clerk like this fellow Nikita should dare to cast aspersions of so damning a character upon the nephew and heir of his superior officer. And he felt instinctively sure his subordinate was on the very point of saying, 'Has it ever occurred to your Excellency to consider that Number Five Hundred might not impossibly be your Excellency's own nephew, Sergius Selistoff the younger?' That was an insult no issue of the Selistoff blood ever brooked for a moment from a whipper-snapper of a secretary.

The chief clerk withered up. He retired into his shell.

'Your Excellency was observing?' he said with the cowed air of a whipped spaniel.

Alexis Selistoff leaned back in his swinging chair and composed himself.

'I was observing,' he went on, still somewhat ruffled by the *contretemps*, 'that from the

very first we knew Ossinsky to be one of three persons entrusted by Ruric Brassoff with some fatal secret. These latest letters, just intercepted at Kieff and forwarded here this morning, supply us with two new facts of considerable value. They show us conclusively that the second of the three persons is Valerian Stefanovic, a refugee at Paris; and Valerian Stefanovic has now lost the clue. We have thus only one person left of the original three, the person denoted in the cipher as Number Four. And Number Four, we now know, must be living at Moscow.'

'Unless we can get Number Four's real name and address,' Nikita put in timidly, 'I don't see — subject to your Excellency's opinion—that the present find brings us much nearer identifying him.'

'Then, *I* do,' General Selistoff answered, scanning one of the papers close with his keen eye like a ferret's. 'I see a great deal. I see my way out of it. I see this means

not only that we shall catch Number Four, and crush this particular plot—which is in itself no small advantage—but also that we stand a fair chance at last of discovering and arresting Ruric Brassoff.'

'In my humble opinion,' the chief clerk said deferentially, 'Prince Ruric Brassoff will never dare to show his face again in Russia.'

'I'm not so sure of that,' the General answered with decision, still gazing hard at the crabbed square of cipher. 'It's clear, from all these letters contain, that Four Hundred and Seventy-five is, to say the least of it, a very important person. Now, Four Hundred and Seventy-five was in Paris last week, and had an interview in the Rue des Saints Pères with the man Stefanovic. As Stefanovic believed, Four Hundred and Seventy-five, at the time of writing, was then on his way to Kieff and Moscow. No other person, I assume, except Ruric Brassoff could

be spoken of in terms of such profound secrecy. For even while Stefanovic denounces and declaims against Four Hundred and Seventy-five as a traitor to the Cause, he is obviously terrified for his own safety; he fears Four Hundred and Seventy-five's power and Four Hundred and Seventy-five's vengeance. Now, who should that be if it's not Ruric Brassoff?' He scanned the letter still closer, then jotted down a stray word or two casually on a blotting-pad. 'Ha, ha! See here!' he exclaimed in surprise, holding the paper up triumphantly. 'Look what I've discovered now. By the cipher, Forty-seven would, of course, be B, and Five would be R. They reverse their initials. That gives you B. R.—equals R. B.—Ruric Brassoff.'

'It looks very like it,' the chief clerk answered cautiously, surveying the paper.

'Very like it!' Alexis Selistoff went on, delighted at his own intuition. 'Tut, tut, tut, man! It's the thing itself. We're on

his track, that's certain. These letters imply that other communications to the same effect were sent by the same means to Number Four at Moscow. Number One doesn't exist; Number Two's Stefanovic; Number Three's Ossinsky; Number Four — well, Number Four we shall know to-morrow. I see a clear means for getting at him directly.'

'You do?' the chief clerk exclaimed.

'Yes, I do,' the General answered. 'See here.' He raised one finger with didactic conclusiveness. 'The man Stefanovic, when he sent these letters from Paris, was clearly unaware that Ossinsky had been arrested a fortnight ago at Kieff. So also was the person or persons unknown who redirected them on from Berlin or Charlottenburg. If Ruric Brassoff—for we'll take it for granted for the present Number Four Hundred and Seventy-five *is* Ruric Brassoff—if Ruric Brassoff remains also unaware of the fact, then he'll come on direct to Ossinsky's house

at Kieff—and there we'll catch him easily. But it isn't likely that'll happen. The people at Kieff would be sure to communicate at once the fact of Ossinsky's arrest to that mysterious woman, ciphered as Number Forty-three, whom Madame Mireff has followed about so indefatigably round Europe, and whom she tracked the other day to a house in Berlin. Number Forty-three would, in turn, no doubt, communicate it at once to Ruric Brassoff. So Ruric Brassoff won't go to Kieff; but he *will* go, unless I'm immensely mistaken, to Moscow.'

'Put his head into the lion's mouth?' the chief clerk murmured incredulously.

'And get it bitten off—yes!' General Selistoff answered with warmth. 'See here, Nikita. You don't know that man as well as I do. He was eighteen months in my own regiment in the Caucasus. He'd do or dare anything. If Ruric Brassoff wants to come to Russia, to Russia Ruric Brassoff will

certainly come. And he'd walk down the Newski Prospect at three in the afternoon, with a flower in his buttonhole, if every policeman in Petersburg was sharp on the look-out for him at all the street corners.'

'But your Excellency's plan is——?' Nikita asked in suspense.

'This. You shall carry it out yourself. Why, nothing could be easier. You take the first train across the German frontier. If we telegraph from Petersburg or Moscow, that would excite suspicion. So you get out at Königsberg, or Eydtkuhnen, or where you will, and send a message in cipher to Stefanovic at Paris, signing it Number Three, which is Ossinsky's right signature. Here's your telegram. I'll write it out. Strike while the iron's hot. The sooner we put this plan into execution the better.'

He dipped a pen hastily into the ink-bottle by his side, and scribbled down a few lines.

'Stefanovic, 28, Rue des Saints Pères, Paris. Just across the frontier. Letter, instructions to hand. Rumoured arrest entirely unfounded. Police on the track. Telegraph in same cipher, at once, to Number Four at Moscow. His letters have gone wrong. Send openly to him by name. No danger at all. Delay may be fatal.

'NUMBER THREE, EYDTKUHNEN.'

Alexis Selistoff surveyed his handicraft with a quiet smile of cruel satisfaction.

'That'll do, I flatter myself,' he said, handing it across to Nikita, 'when it's put into cipher.'

The chief clerk ran his eye over it, enchanted.

'Capital, Excellency!' he answered, rubbing his hands softly together at the well-planned ruse. 'He'll telegraph back, of course, to Number Four, by his real name and address;

and you'll instruct the telegraph administration to intercept the message.'

'Quite so,' the General answered, still grimly triumphant. 'I fancy it's a good card, and if it turns up trumps we ought to be able to catch, not only this insignificant Number Four, whoever he may be, but what's much more important, Ruric Brassoff himself in person also.'

'You think so?' Nikita mused interrogatively.

'Think? I'm almost sure of it. Look your facts in the face. Ruric Brassoff's well on his way to Moscow before now, and we'll watch for him carefully at Number Four's address, whenever we find it. . . . Mind, no precipitancy, Nikita; caution, caution, caution! Don't try to arrest Number Four, however sure you may be of him, without my leave. What I want is not so much *him* as Ruric Brassoff. It's clear Ruric Brassoff is at present going the rounds of his fellow-con-

spirators for some very serious and important purpose. Sooner or later he'll get on to Moscow. We must watch and wait. Better bide our own time. . . . Now go and work that telegram out into the cipher.'

CHAPTER XLV.

À LA RUSSE.

It isn't so easy for a 'contraband person,' as they say in Russia, to get across the frontier to Moscow unobserved. Even the familiar tweed suit of the British tourist, however large its checks, doesn't suffice to protect one. Mr. Hayward was so conscious, indeed, of the numberless difficulties which lay in his way, that on second thoughts he didn't attempt to go by the direct route, *viâ* Wilna and Minsk, but took the cross-country train instead, by Dunaburg and Smolensk. At the last little town he descended for the night at the second-rate hotel—accommodation is bad off the main

lines, of course — meaning to continue his journey next day to Moscow.

But Russia is Russia. Along certain familiar tourist tracks, it is true, the police and the public are fairly accustomed by this time to the inexplicable vagaries of the Western traveller; and though all foreign visitors are duly noted and numbered and kept in view by the authorities, from the moment they arrive till they leave the country, they are not openly molested by minute or obtrusive police supervision. Off the beaten track, however, a stranger is a rarity, and he has to account for his presence and his business in the place to the local magnates by a most stringent inquisition. Mr. Hayward soon found he had committed a grievous error in making that ill-advised detour by Dunaburg. The authorities were most curious as to his reasons for adopting so unusual a route. Why had he turned so far out of his way if he was going at last to Moscow? Why had he stopped

the night at such a place as Smolensk? Why did he want to see anything of rural Russia? Why had he tried at all to break his journey anywhere?

Mr. Hayward answered as unconcernedly as he could, with a very innocent air, that he was an English tourist who wanted to form an opinion for himself of the agricultural provinces. But that answer only provoked the *ispravnik's* suspicions still more.

'To write about it in the papers, I suppose?' he said, with a slight sneer, in his very bad French; for Mr. Hayward, of course, affected complete ignorance of his native Russian. 'Yes, that's the way with you English. You spy out everything. But we Russians don't want you to come peering about our country without good reason. You must justify your presence by business or affairs. Let me see your passport again, if you please, Monsieur Mortimer.'

Mr. Hayward handed it back to him.

'From Paris,' the *ispravnik* said slowly, conning it over to himself, with the true Jack-in-office air of great wisdom and cunning. 'And you stopped at Berlin on the way. Well, that's odd now, certainly. Why should an Englishman come from London to Moscow *viâ* Paris and Dunaburg? This thing must be looked into, sir. You are detained for the present, while I communicate with Petersburg.'

It was with profound misgivings that Mr. Hayward retired that evening into his narrow bedroom at the Smolensk inn. He slept very badly. The room was confined, stuffy, ill ventilated. He felt a choking in his throat. Towards morning be began to get distinctly ill. He tried to rise, but found he wasn't strong enough. Hastily he sent round for a local doctor. The doctor came, and examined him with some care. Very little doubt what was the matter, he said. It was a case of diphtheria.

Diphtheria! Mr. Hayward's heart sank within him at the sound. He must get up at all risks, doctor or inspector to the contrary notwithstanding, and pursue his journey straight ahead to Moscow. If he died here at Smolensk, why, Owen's life wouldn't be worth six months' purchase. That vindictive Stefanovic! Those incriminating papers! He was a British subject; he brandished his passport ostentatiously in the doctor's face. He *must* go on at once; it was important business.

But the doctor shook his head. At St. Petersburg or Moscow, perhaps, where people are more accustomed to the ways of those mad English, his protest might have been successful. At Smolensk, a mere straggling country town, with a big military garrison, it was worse than useless. The doctor gave orders to the host as he went downstairs:

'See at your peril you don't let that lunatic in Number Twelve escape. His

disease is contagious; it might become epidemic.'

And the *ispravnik* had warned him the night before:

'If you allow the suspected person in this room to leave the town without a written order from the superintendent of police, you shall answer for it with your own back.'

And the host nodded wisely.

For three days, accordingly, Mr. Hayward lay there, between life and death, in an agony of suspense, remorse, and horror. If he died, all was up; if he lived, he might arrive too late at Moscow to avert the catastrophe. And when the diphtheria itself began to get better, the doctor reported he was suffering as well from low malarial fever. It was that hateful inn. Mr. Hayward fumed and fretted. Germs flew about visibly. Week passed after week, and still he lay there like a log. What might be happening meanwhile at Moscow he hadn't the slightest idea. He daren't

telegraph to London; he daren't write to Olga Mireff at Berlin for news. He lay there all alone, and untended, in that dirty little room, eating his heart out with delay, and retarding his own recovery meanwhile by his profound anxiety.

One thing, however, he had happily been able to do. The very first evening, after the *ispravnik* had gone, and while he feared detection, he had written a hasty line to Fomenko at Moscow, and posted it openly, though unobserved, in the letter-box of the hotel. It was in cipher, of course, but otherwise plain enough. It said these few words only:

'I am on my way to Moscow. Do nothing rash till I come. Believe no foolish ravings. I may be delayed, but wait for my arrival. Remember, I am your chief. Implicit obedience is more necessary than ever.

'Yours, for Russia,

'Ruric Brassoff.'

And at St. Petersburg, meanwhile, General Alexis Selistoff had received news, with great delight, of a suspicious person who had descended unexpectedly at the hotel at Smolensk. Brisk telegrams passed quickly to and fro between the bureau of the Third Section and the little provincial office. The stranger had come from England, it seemed, and had an English passport, but he was last from Paris direct, as shown by the recent *visa* of the Russian Embassy. Moreover, he had stopped on his way at Berlin, no doubt for communication with the refugees at Charlottenburg.

Alexis Selistoff twisted his grizzled gray moustache still more nervously than usual in his intense excitement. Could this be the man they were so eagerly in search of—the Four Hundred and Seventy-five who was to proceed, on the quest of Number Four, to Moscow? What more likely? What more natural? He would have gone in that case

from England to Paris to see Valerian Stefanovic, as they knew Four Hundred and Seventy-five had done. Then on to Berlin, to visit that mysterious woman whom Olga Mireff was always dogging, and who, no doubt, had forwarded the letters to Ossinsky at Kieff. Thence to Moscow by devious ways —such as Smolensk *viâ* Dunaburg.

Alexis Selistoff stroked his chin with unconcealed delight. They were running the fox to earth at last, it was clear. He believed he had his hand on Ruric Brassoff.

But he was in no hurry to take him till he knew all was safe. He must prove it up to the hilt. He must be sure of his prisoner.

'And meanwhile, good Mr. Ispravnik at Smolensk, I beg of you, keep a sharp eye on this man. Don't let him escape, but above all, don't let him guess for a moment you're watching him.'

And then, one day later, good news from Moscow! Ha, ha! a great victory!

'The telegram in cipher which your Excellency desired should be intercepted *en route* has come to hand to-day. It is directed'—Alexis Selistoff's eyes gleamed bright at the sight—'to Michael Fomenko, 24, Slav Bazar Street.'

The chief of the Third Section held it up for some minutes in triumph, and gazed at it before he proceeded to decipher it. This, then, was Number Four's address—24, Slav Bazar Street. His ruse had succeeded. He had found out the house where Four Hundred and Seventy-five, be he Ruric Brassoff or not, was so soon to present himself.

After a minute or two he began painfully to spell out the words and sentences of the ciphered message. They didn't tell him much, to be sure; but as far as they went they confirmed his suspicions.

'Michael Fomenko, 24, Slav Bazar Street. Number Three telegraphs to me from Eydt-

kuhnen that he is safe across the frontier, and that rumours of his arrest are entirely false. Police on the track. Beware of Four Hundred and Seventy-five. He came to me here and tried to extort from me my copy of sealed envelopes. I believe he has turned traitor. Perhaps Forty-three has turned traitor with him.

'NUMBER TWO, PARIS.'

Alexis Selistoff pressed his bell.

The chief clerk entered.

'Nikita,' the General said, holding the telegram in one hand, 'this is very important. Wire at once to the *ispravnik* at Smolensk that no difficulties must be thrown in the way of the Englishman Mortimer. As soon as he's well enough, he is to be permitted to go where he will, to Moscow or elsewhere. But on no account must he be lost sight of for one single second, or allowed to get across the frontier out of the country.'

The chief clerk bowed.

'It shall be attended to, Excellency,' he answered, all compliance.

'And look here,' Alexis Selistoff went on, thinking it out as he spoke; 'I shall want this fellow watched—watched closely, discreetly, by a competent person. I can't trust that meddling busybody of an inspector at Smolensk. He'll frighten our man, and give him warning beforehand. He's got no gumption. That's not what I want. We must give him, above all things, rope enough to hang himself with. . . . Nikita, you must go yourself. You're the man for the place. You've managed the business at Eydtkuhnen very well. You must manage this one, too. . . . Run down to Smolensk as a commercial traveller. I'll give you a note to the inspector completely superseding him. Let this fellow who calls himself Mortimer have his own way in everything and do just as he likes. Throw dust in his eyes, and no obstacles in his path.

Make the inspector apologize to him for needlessly annoying a British subject. Wait a bit. Write a letter before you go reprimanding our *ispravnik*, and make the *ispravnik* show it to him. Too much zeal—you know the kind of thing—diplomatic, cautious—too much misplaced zeal in interfering with subjects of a friendly Power. But don't overdo it. Remember, if it's Ruric Brassoff, Ruric Brassoff's a Russian, and he knows our ways. To put things too strong would only open his eyes and excite his suspicion. Let him go where he likes, but keep a close watch on him. Not obtrusive, don't you know. No soldiers dressed up in plain clothes and walking in pairs—one, two; one, two; one, two—like a regiment. Few picked men, all unlike, all natural. Don't rouse his attention. But, one or other of you, keep firm watch on him till he gets to Moscow. I'll manage about Michael Fomenko myself. *His* house shall be watched, too. We're on the point of surprising them.'

CHAPTER XLVI.

CROSSING THE RUBICON.

Weeks passed before Mr. Hayward was well enough to leave Smolensk. But before he left, it was some comfort to him to see that all suspicion as to his nationality had entirely disappeared, and that the police had ceased to trouble themselves about his movements in any way. Indeed, he had the satisfaction of knowing that the blustering inspector had to eat humble pie; for the fellow came to the hotel, while Mr. Hayward was still very ill, and made most profuse apologies for his unintentional rudeness to a British subject. Nay, he even showed, at the same time, by official command, a departmental letter he

had received that day from his chief at St. Petersburg. Mr. Hayward smiled to read it—'twas so intensely Russian. He saw in a moment it was meant to be taken two ways. The supposed angry Englishman was expected to accept it as a complete snub for the inspector and a victory for himself, while the inspector's pride was gracefully salved at the same time by a careful reservation or two as to the abstract right of the police to interrogate foreigners whenever they thought it necessary. Nikita, indeed, had done his work well. He had succeeded in blinding even Ruric Brassoff.

From that day forth, accordingly, the police gave him no more trouble. He was allowed to do as he liked, and what he specially noted was the gratifying fact that no spy or detective was set to watch him. Mr. Hayward knew well the Russian spy, his clumsiness and his awkwardness. He remembered him in the great upheaval of

1871 as though it had been but yesterday. It was the easiest thing in the world, indeed, to recognise the *mouchard*. That embarrassed air, that ostentatious carelessness, that glance full of suspicion and fear which he fixes upon the countenance of every passer-by—these are signs which can never deceive an experienced eye like Ruric Brassoff's. And yet those men shrink from looking you full in the face, for all that; they skulk and glance sideways; they slink by and look askance to see if you notice them. So different from the frank gaze of the honest commercial traveller, for example, who came from Petersburg to Smolensk during Mr. Hayward's illness, and who talked bad French to him now and again when he was beginning to be convalescent, in the poky little billiard-room.

A good-humoured, light-hearted fellow, that blunt commercial gentleman—he travelled in tea—but provincial, very. It was amusing

to hear him discuss Mr. Hayward's dress and Mr. Hayward's English manners, before his very face, to the smiling and nodding hotel-keeper. Of course he had no idea the man in the tweed suit understood Russian, so he was frankness itself in his brusque comments on the stranger.

'That's the way with these English, you know,' he remarked to the landlord one evening, taking his cigarette from his mouth and laughing unobtrusively. 'They're the most conceited nation in Europe, to my mind —the most self-confident, the most pig-headed. At Orel, where I came from, we always call them pigs of English. This fellow, for instance, talks about Russia already, after six weeks in the country, spent mostly in bed, as if he knew all about it by a sort of intuition. He'll go home and write a book on us, I expect, before he's done: "Six Weeks in Russia, with a Plan for a Constitution"—that's the English way. Ah,

we know a thing or two, I can tell you, down yonder at Orel!—I beg your pardon, monsieur, for addressing my compatriot for a moment in his own tongue. He understands but little French, as you are aware. We Easterns are still barbarians. I was remarking to him upon the singular insight you English possess in dealing with the affairs of foreign countries. Your knowledge of our character, for example, after so brief an acquaintance with our people, seems to me nothing short of marvellous. But there! you English lead civilization, of course. The French and Germans don't understand that. We Russians, who watch the game from afar, we know it;' and he winked at the landlord obtrusively.

Mr. Hayward smiled a grim smile. An honest fellow, this traveller, though he thought himself so clever. But if Alexis Selistoff could have seen his chief clerk Nikita as he uttered those words, both in Russian and in

French, with perfect solemnity, he would have clapped the man on the back with effusive delight, and have recommended him to the Czar forthwith for immediate promotion.

At last the time came when Mr. Hayward might move. He was still weak and ill, but the good-humoured commercial gentleman from Orel, who travelled in tea for a firm in Petersburg, kindly volunteered to see him off at the station. That was really very nice of him. Mr. Hayward didn't notice, however, that, after seeing him off, the good-humoured commercial gentleman, unencumbered by sample-boxes, went round to the other platform and entered a special carriage on the self-same train by the opposite side—a carriage already occupied by two distinguished gentlemen of military appearance. Nor did he observe, either, when they reached Moscow, that one of these gentlemen followed him close in a sleigh to

the Hotel du Bazar Slave, where he meant to put up, so as to be near Fomenko.

That night Ruric Brassoff slept soundly in a bed in the town he knew so well. It was strange to be there again. It made the Russian heart throb hard within his weather-beaten breast to feel himself once more in the great heart of Russia.

Next morning early he rose, and after his coffee and roll—how good they tasted!—sauntered out into the streets with a swinging gait, looking about him right and left, like the English tourist he personated. Yes, it was Moscow still — that old, familiar Moscow. The time was winter. The same nipping, dry air; the same slush in the streets; the same dirty-brown snow; the same fur-covered mob of passers-by as ever. In the bright Eastern sunlight the gaudy Oriental decorations of the Kremlin glittered and shimmered as of old in barbaric splendour. The churches stared down upon him

with myriad hues of green and gold as in his shadowy childhood. The icicles shone on the eaves as ever. Only he himself was changed. He saw it all now with Western, not with Russian, eyes; it was a measure to him of the distance he had traversed meanwhile. He used once to think Moscow so grand a city.

The streets, he soon noticed, as he strolled on his way, were chock-full of spies. In point of fact, Moscow was just then passing through one of her periodical Nihilistic scares. The Czar was expected before long, people said, and police activity was everywhere at its amplest. Mr. Hayward's heart beat high with long unwonted excitement. This was just like old times! Spies! spies! how familiar! And how comic they were, too, these temporary detectives; private soldiers dressed up as civilians by the batch, and patrolling the streets here and there in search of the contraband. But they took no notice

of him. They mooned about in little parties, like men accustomed for many years to concerted movement, and incapable of forgetting the ingrained lessons of the drill-sergeant. Then their dress, too, how grotesque! In the hurry of the moment, it was impossible to obtain different clothes for each; so whole squads had the same hats, the same coats, the same trousers. The very variations only heightened the absurdity. Some carried light sticks to give them ease and swagger, while others wore great blue spectacles poised awkwardly on their noses to make them look as much as possible like university students. But it was all in vain: soldier and spy, soldier and spy, soldier and spy, was written in plain words across the face of every one of them.

However, they never glanced at Mr. Hayward at all. A mere English tourist. He observed that with pleasure. Not a soul turned to look at him. Only, a long way off,

at the opposite side of the street, a very different person lounged slowly and unobtrusively along the pathway after him. This person didn't in the least resemble a spy, or a common soldier either. He was a gentleman in appearance, and might have been taken for a doctor, or a lawyer, or a Government official. He never came unpleasantly near Mr. Hayward, or excited attention in any way. He merely lounged on, keeping his man always in sight, and occasionally looking in a nonchalant way into shops at the corner. He shadowed him imperceptibly.

At last Mr. Hayward returned, and in the most casual fashion made his way once more to the Slav Bazar Street. At Number 24 he stopped short and rang the bell. The *dvornik*, or porter, answered the summons at once.

'Is Michael Fomenko at home?' Mr. Hayward asked boldly—for the first time, in Russian.

And the porter made answer :

'He is at home. Third floor. Letter H on the corridor. Go on up and you'll find him.'

Mr. Hayward went up, and knocked at the door the man had indicated.

'Who's there?' a shrill voice asked from within.

And Mr. Hayward replied in a very low tone, almost whispering :

'Four Hundred and Seventy-five. Open to him.'

There was a second's hesitation, then a man's face peeped half uncertain through the chink of the door. It was a timid young face. Mr. Hayward was prepared for such indecision. Quick as lightning, he took a card and a pencil from his pocket. Before the man's very eyes he wrote down in a well-known hand the magic name, 'Ruric Brassoff.' Fomenko stared at it for a second in blank amazement and doubt. Then, making his

mind up suddenly, he opened the door wide.

'Come in,' he said, with a tinge of something like awe in his ringing voice. 'Four Hundred and Seventy-five, I welcome you.'

Mr. Hayward entered. The door shut quick behind his back. The fatal step was taken. He was in Russia once more, talking Russian as of old, and closeted close in Moscow with a suspected Nihilist.

But at the very same moment that he mounted the stairs of Number 24, the gentlemanly person who had been following him down the street passed carelessly under the big gateway of a house opposite. As he passed it his manner altered; he grew grim and formal. On the first-floor, he entered a room on the right without knocking. In it sat the good-humoured commercial person from Orel, who travelled in tea, and who had come on from Smolensk. He was seated in the gloom, a little way back from the

window; the blind was pulled rather more than half-way down; and in his hand he held an opera-glass. He was looking across towards the other house opposite.

The gentlemanly person nodded.

'Well, Nikita,' he said gaily, in a triumphant whisper, 'I think we've secured him. This is our man, I don't doubt. If he isn't Ruric Brassoff, at any rate, in spite of his English tweed suit, he talks Russian fluently. For he spoke to the porter a long sentence, and the porter answered him at once. Now, I happen to know our good friend Borodin, who's been *dvornik* over there by my orders for a fortnight, doesn't speak a single word of either French or German.'

Nikita smiled acquiescence.

'Yes, we've got him!' he said. 'We've got him!'

CHAPTER XLVII.

A SINGULAR INCIDENT.

MICHAEL FOMENKO'S room was a bare little *salon* on the third floor of an overgrown Moscow tenement-house, let out in flats and apartments after the Parisian fashion. The furniture was scanty and *bourgeois* in character —a round table in the middle, a square sofa, a few chairs, with the inevitable *samovar*, made up its chief contents. On one side stood a desk, with locked drawers and little pigeon-holes. On the other, a door led into a cupboard in the wall, or, rather, in the partition which separated the room from the adjoining *salon*.

This adjoining *salon*, as it happened, had

been occupied for some days by the gentlemanly person who knew Nikita.

As Mr. Hayward entered, and cast a glance round the apartment, he saw at once that Fomenko was greatly perturbed at his arrival. His new acquaintance—for they had known one another hitherto on paper only—was an earnest-looking young man of twenty-five or thereabouts, substituted by Mr. Hayward as one of Owen's 'trustees' after the death of Dimitri Ogareff in 1887. He was tall and fair, a journalist by trade, but a poet by temperament, very handsome and ardent, with intense blue eyes, and delicate quivering nostrils, like a wild horse of the Ukraine. There was a look of eagerness on his face, too, a divine unrest, which no terror could eclipse, no pallor blot out from it. But he was doubly alarmed, just then, all the same, at Mr. Hayward's presence. In the first place, he was afraid lest spies should discover him closeted with Ruric Brassoff. In the second place, he

wasn't sure whether this was really Ruric Brassoff himself at all, or only some ingenious police pretender. Stefanovic's letters had given him grave cause to doubt. He faltered and hesitated, unwilling on the one hand to incriminate himself to a possible spy, or on the other hand to be guilty of discourtesy or suspicion towards the real Ruric Brassoff.

The Chief, however, well experienced in reading every sentiment of the revolutionary heart, divined his difficulty at once, and met it with perfect candour.

'You are afraid, Fomenko,' he said kindly, taking the young man's arm with that paternal air that seemed so natural to him after twenty years' intercourse with Owen Cazalet. 'You suspect me of being a spy. My dear friend, I don't wonder. It's not surprising you should think me so. We live in such a terror. But I'm Ruric Brassoff, all the same. You have seen my own hand for it. Ask me what

other proof on earth you will. I will satisfy your curiosity.'

The young man, taking in the situation slowly, hung back once more, and regarded him with anxiety. What was this he had done? Already he had admitted more than enough to hang himself. Four Hundred and Seventy-five? Ruric Brassoff? The police were so ubiquitous! He had let the man in on the strength of such assurances. Suppose he was really a spy? He gazed at Mr. Hayward with infinite fear and distrust hovering in those earnest blue eyes.

'There must be some mistake somewhere,' he said, faltering. 'I know nobody of the name of Ruric Brassoff. And Seven Hundred and Forty-five—what do you mean by that? This is Number 24. You must have mistaken your directions.'

A soft and quiet smile, half contempt, half pity, played almost unobserved round Mr. Hayward's aristocratic lips. This young man

was a very poor conspirator indeed, when it came to dealing with spies—but he was good and honest.

'My dear fellow,' the Chief said frankly, seating himself in a chair, and drawing it up to the table, 'if I were really a detective, all this beating about the bush would avail you nothing. You're shutting the stable door, as the English proverb says. after the steed is stolen. You've said and done quite enough to condemn you already. No man who wasn't one of us would for a moment have admitted me on that name and number—above all, just now, in the present state of Moscow. Don't try to hedge in that futile way. If I'm a spy and I want to catch you, I've evidence enough and to spare already. If I'm Ruric Brassoff—as I am—don't let us waste any more of my precious time upon such dangerous nonsense. Let's get to business at once. I've come to relieve you of a great responsibility.'

'Hush, hush!' Fomenko cried, sitting down and leaning across towards him eagerly. 'You must be very careful. Mind what you say or do. We're surrounded just now by enemies on every side. I can see them everywhere. There's a lodger downstairs, for example—a woman with great staring eyes, a milliner or something—she's a spy, I'm certain. And there's a man next door, a sort of official or underling, who meets me on the stairs a great deal oftener than I think at all natural; I believe he's watching me. I'd have moved from these apartments long ago, in fact, and cleared them of documents, only I was afraid of exciting still greater suspicion if I went away elsewhere. And besides—I was waiting for—I was expecting visitors.'

'Myself, in fact,' Mr. Hayward suggested.

'Well, at any rate Ruric Brassoff.'

Mr. Hayward leaned quietly forward.

'Now, Fomenko, my dear friend,' he said, in a very grave voice, 'you've admitted the

fact openly, yourself, and if I were a spy I should by this time have everything I could wish against you. But I'm not a spy. As I told you just now, I'm Ruric Brassoff. Why do you hesitate to believe it? That handwriting I've just showed you is the hand you have always so gladly obeyed. I know your devotion; no patriot more eager. If I had sent you an order through the regular channels, signed with that self-same name —I remember your fidelity well—you know yourself you would implicitly have obeyed it.'

The young man hesitated.

'Yes, certainly,' he said at last, 'if it came, as you say, through the regular channels.'

'But you doubt me, all the same?' And he looked at him reproachfully.

Fomenko smiled a faint smile. His moral courage was great, his physical courage feeble.

'Spies are so clever,' he murmured low, 'and forgery's so easy.'

'But what makes you doubt?' Mr. Hayward asked, laying his hand on the young man's arm.

'Well, I saw a portrait of Ruric Brassoff once,' Fomenko answered, blushing, 'and to tell you the truth, dear friend, even allowing for age and disguise and all that, you don't in the least resemble him.'

A wonderful light dawned in Mr. Hayward's eyes. With an outburst of emotion, he seized the young man by the wrist, and pulled him towards him unresisting. The manœuvre was well devised. The magnetic touch seemed to thrill through Fomenko's frame, as it had often thrilled through Owen Cazalet's. Then, in a low, quick voice, Mr. Hayward began to pour into his brother conspirator's ear the same astounding tale of a hard-won victory over nature and his own body which he had poured into Olga Mireff's

in the sanctum at Bond Street. Fomenko listened, all responsive, with a sympathetic tremor that rang resonant through his inmost marrow. The effect was marvellous. As Mr. Hayward went on, the young man flushed rosy red; all doubt and fear left him. When the Chief had finished his tale, Fomenko rose, all tremulous, and in a tumult of feeling wrung his hand twice or thrice. Then, yielding to an Oriental impulse, he fell on the elder's bosom and sobbed aloud for a minute with almost inaudible murmurs. He spoke very low and cautiously, but he spoke out of his full heart.

'Ruric Brassoff, Ruric Brassoff!' he cried, in a tone of profound shame, 'forgive me, forgive me! If for one second I seemed to doubt you, it was not *you*, but *them*, that I feared and doubted. I doubt no longer now. I fear no longer. I know you at once by your great words for Russia's truest son. I thank God I have lived to hear that noble

voice. Command, and I will obey. I am yours, for Russia.'

A sympathetic moisture stood dim in Mr. Hayward's eyes. The revolutionist within him was now thoroughly awakened once more. Ashamed as he felt of himself and of the double part he was perforce playing, he was yet proud of disciples like Michael Fomenko. And, after all, he said to his own heart, it *was* for Russia—for Russia. For was it not better in the long-run for Russia that she should have Owen Cazalet's sympathy and aid from afar off in England, than that he should be cut off in all his youth and strength and beauty, who might do and dare so much in quieter and more peaceful ways to serve and befriend her?

He sat down at the table, took a pen in his hand, and wrote a few words on a scrap of paper, which he handed to Fomenko.

'There,' he said, 'if you want more proof,

is the last order I sent you, from the inn at Smolensk.'

But Fomenko, hardly looking at it, made answer in a tone of the most fervid enthusiasm :

'I need no proof at all. I only ask your pardon. Now I have once heard Ruric Brassoff's own grand words, Ruric Brassoff's own authentic voice, I require nothing further. Your speech is enough. It is the tongue of a seer, a priest, a prophet.'

The Chief took his hand once more. He wrung it hard. He held it, trembling. Heart went out to heart. They two thrilled in harmony. For a moment neither broke that sacred silence. Then Ruric Brassoff spoke again :

'And you can trust me?' he asked gently.

'Implicitly.'

Again the great Nihilist pressed his follower's hand hard. Oh, how glad he was he had to deal with a poet's soul like this,

instead of with a mere suspicious and pragmatical fool like Valerian Stefanovic!

'And you don't mind what that narrow brain has written you from Paris?' he asked again.

The young man smiled an almost contemptuous smile.

'Stefanovic!' he cried—'Stefanovic! And when *you* are in question! Oh, the pathos of it, the absurdity! Mind what that poor thing says—that poor, cramped, small nature! —beside Ruric Brassoff's words!' He took his Chief's palm like a woman's between his own two. 'I know what enthusiasm means,' he went on, leaning over it. 'For your sake —in your company — I could die, Ruric Brassoff!'

The Chief stepped back just one pace, and fixed his eyes hard on the young man's.

'Then, give me back the sealed envelope,' he said, in a tone of command like a military officer.

Without a moment's hesitation, Fomenko hastened over to the cabinet at the side, with the locked drawers and pigeon-holes, took a key from his pocket, and drew out a small bundle of carefully tied documents. From it, after a short search, he selected an envelope with a large red seal.

'Take your own, Ruric Brassoff!' he said in a very firm voice, handing the paper across to him. 'You know better than I what is best for Russia. I hold it in trust from you. Though I die for it, take it!'

'And die for it you will!' a loud voice interrupted. Someone seized hand and arm, and intercepted the envelope.

In an agony of surprise, Michael Fomenko stared round. Ruric Brassoff, by his side, leaped back astonished. For a moment the young journalist was dazed. It was the voice of the gentlemanly man who had lodgings on the same floor; and beside him stood the good-humoured commercial person who

travelled in tea, and whom Ruric Brassoff had seen at Smolensk.

In the background, half a dozen of the soldiers in plain clothes with blue spectacles or light canes came tumbling through the wall. But they were armed with short swords now, and held in their hand regulation revolvers.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW.

It was a minute or two before Mr. Hayward —or Ruric Brassoff, as you will—stunned and surprised by this sudden invasion, had a clear enough head to take in what had happened. Then, as he gazed about him slowly, with one soldier on each side, he felt his arms being helplessly pinioned behind him, he began to realize all was up, and to see how the intruders had entered so noiselessly.

The cupboard door on the opposite side from the cabinet now stood wide open. But the cupboard itself, as he could see to his surprise, had no back or partition; it opened

direct into the adjoining room, and through the temporary doorway thus formed he could catch vistas of still more soldiers in civilian costume, waiting the word of command, and all armed with revolvers. In a moment he recognised how they had managed this capture. The soldiers must have sawn through the wooden back of two adjacent cupboards beforehand, and at the exact right moment noiselessly removed the whole intervening woodwork, shelves and contents and all, so as to give access direct to Fomenko's apartment. More too! The two principals must have listened through the keyhole of the outermost door to their entire conversation. One flash of intuition sufficed to show him that Alexis Selistoff's myrmidons now knew exactly who he was and why he came there. Low as they two had spoken, he couldn't conceal from himself the fact that they must have heard him acknowledge he was Ruric Brassoff.

The good-humoured commercial traveller stepped forward with an air of authority as soon as the chief prisoner was safely pinioned, and laid his hand hard on his captive's shoulder.

'Prince Ruric Brassoff,' he said, in a formal voice, 'I arrest your Excellency on a charge of conspiracy against his Most Sacred and Most Orthodox Majesty, the Czar of All the Russias.'

'Traitor!' Ruric Brassoff answered, turning upon him with a face of the utmost contempt and loathing. 'Vile spy and reptile, I'm ashamed of having spoken to you.'

The commercial gentleman smiled blandly and good-humouredly.

'Your own fault,' he said, with a quiet air of official triumph. 'You let yourself in for it. You should choose your acquaintances better. My name is Nikita, chief clerk and secretary to General Alexis Selistoff.'

He turned to his second prisoner.

'Michael Fomenko, author and journalist,' he said, in the same formal voice, 'I arrest you as an accomplice of Prince Ruric Brassoff in his conspiracy against his Most Sacred and Most Orthodox Majesty.'

Fomenko, white as a sheet, stood still and answered nothing. His horror was all for the arrest and betrayal of Ruric Brassoff.

The soldiers gripped their arms. Two stood in front of each, two behind, two beside them. Nikita turned triumphant to the gentlemanly lodger next door.

'I think, Major and Count,' he said, smiling, 'we may really congratulate ourselves upon having effected this important and difficult arrest without trouble or bloodshed.'

The Count bowed and nodded. He was all polite acquiescence.

'And especially on having secured this incriminating document,' he said, turning it over.

Ruric Brassoff glanced round in a ferment

of horror, for Owen's sake. The Count held the envelope in his hand, with every appearance of care, and gazed at the seal abstractedly. What was he going to do with it? That was the question. Oh, if only they had arrived one moment later, the Chief thought with a thrill of remorse, he could have flung it in the fire that burned brightly in the grate! But they timed their arrival well. Too well, too cleverly. They must have been listening and waiting for the critical moment to arrive, with ear at the crack of the door and eye at the keyhole. On the turning-point they entered. The envelope was in their hands. All, all was lost! Alexis Selistoff would now learn Owen Cazalet's secret.

'Yes, unopened,' Nikita echoed, closing his lips firm like a rat-trap. 'That's important, very. His Excellency's orders are that we're to keep it intact till he arrives in Moscow. He desires nobody to know its contents but himself. This is a State affair.

I have his Excellency's own hand for it. Excuse me, Count, you must give me the letter.'

The military man handed it over with a salute. Nikita wrapped it carefully in the folds of his capacious pocket-book, and placed it with deference in his breast-pocket. The Count stepped aside, and gave the word to the soldiers:

'Forward!'

Prompt on the command they marched the prisoners down the stairs and to the door of the house, one after the other, in silence.

Below, two large sleighs were in waiting—not common droschkys, but handsome private conveyances of a family character. A soldier driver sat on the box of each. In the first—for due precedence must always be observed, even where criminals are concerned — the Count took his place, with Ruric Brassoff by his side; the second contained Nikita and Michael Fomenko. Two soldiers in plain

clothes sat upright behind in either sleigh, with revolvers in their hands.

'Shoot if he tries to move,' the Count said calmly; and the soldiers saluted.

They drove rapidly along the streets, the bells tinkling merrily on the crisp air as they went. In Paris or London, the cortège would have excited no little attention. But in Moscow, better drilled, people looked the other way; they knew it was a case of political prisoners, and even to display too ardent a curiosity might prove a bad thing for the sympathetic bystander.

The sleighs drew up at last before the Prefecture of Urban Police. The prisoners were tumbled out and hurried into a room where a Commissary sat awaiting them. In a fixed official voice, Nikita gave their names and the charges against them with no more emotion in his tones than if he were accusing two well-known offenders of petty larceny.

'Prince Ruric Brassoff, formerly Aulic

Councillor and Chamberlain to her Imperial Majesty the Empress, charged with participating in a murderous plot against the life of the Most Sacred and Most Orthodox Czar; and Michael Fomenko, author and journalist, charged with being an accomplice to said Ruric Brassoff.'

The Commissary noted down the wording of the charges with official exactness. Even in Russia, red tape keeps up some show of legality.

'Remitted to the Central Prison till to-morrow morning,' the Commissary said dryly. Then in a different voice, turning to Nikita, he added, 'You expect General Selistoff by the night train, doubtless?'

'Yes, he arrives to-morrow morning,' Nikita answered with a pleasant nod. 'He will examine the prisoners in person. Their information may be important. Madame Mireff is here already. She will be confronted with the conspirators when the General

arrives. We expect she can give evidence of some value against them.'

'For the rest,' the Count said, nonchalantly twirling his pointed moustache, 'what we overheard ourselves in Fomenko's room is quite enough to condemn them. This gentleman admitted he was Prince Brassoff. And M. Nikita has secured the important document which the General desired should be brought to him unopened.'

The Commissary nodded.

'To the Central Prison,' he said once more, after a few more formalities had been gone through in a perfunctory fashion.

The soldiers marched them out again, and put them back in the sleighs, and they drove away, still more rapidly, towards their place of detention.

That night Ruric Brassoff passed in a solitary cell, fitted up with some petty concessions to his princely rank, but otherwise bare and cold and wretched and uncomfortable.

And all night long he thought of Owen Cazalet and Ionê Dracopoli—and of what could have brought Olga Mireff at this juncture to Moscow.

If only he could have seen her for one minute alone! If only he could have said to her, 'Nikita has an envelope. Kill him! Secure it! Destroy it!' But there he lay helpless, cooped up in that narrow prison cell; and when he saw Olga to-morrow morning, perhaps it would be too late; perhaps he would be unable to communicate with her at all. Perhaps he might find her a traitor to Russia.

His own life he gave up—he owed it to Russia. And for Russia he despaired. But one thing still troubled him. He wished he could only have saved Owen from the sword of Damocles that must hang for ever henceforth over his head and Ionê's.

Olga Mireff in Moscow! What could have brought her there? he wondered. A

horrible doubt rose floating for a moment in his mind like a hateful picture. Had Olga turned against him? No, no; he flung the doubt from him like an evil dream. Yet stay! what was this? He was a traitor himself. Whom could Russia trust now, if Ruric Brassoff betrayed her?

And then, in a sudden flash of insight, Fomenko's casual words came back to him with a new and unsuspected meaning. That 'lodger downstairs, a woman with great staring eyes, a milliner or something,' whom he took to be a spy—who on earth could it be but Olga Mireff?

Was she there to betray them or to warn them? That was the great problem. Would she turn up to befriend him to-morrow morning at that supreme moment, or to confront and denounce him as a convicted conspirator?

He had played for a terrible stake, and lost. If Olga forsook him, all was finished indeed, and Owen would be at Alexis Selistoff's mercy.

CHAPTER XLIX.

AT THE THIRD SECTION.

Early next morning a gaoler unlocked the door brusquely.

'Prince Ruric Brassoff,' he said in a shrill voice of command, strangely mingled with conventional respect for his prisoner's high rank, 'get up and dress at once. General Alexis Selistoff requires your presence immediately at the Kremlin.'

Starting from his prison bed, Ruric Brassoff rose and dressed, in a maze of conflicting feelings. They brought him some breakfast. He sat down at the plain deal table and ate it mechanically. Then he went out to the prison gate, where a warder, without a word,

put his hands in irons. Ruric Brassoff accepted that indignity in dignified silence. A sleigh was in waiting there—only one, this morning. Fomenko wasn't wanted. The minor prisoner's rest had not been disturbed so early.

It was a clear keen morning of the true Russian type. Fresh snow had fallen during the night and lay white in the streets, and the horses danced merrily over it with the light weight behind them. At the door of the branch office of the Third Section they halted.

'Descend, Prince,' Nikita said shortly. And Ruric Brassoff descended.

Two soldiers took his arms on either side, and marched him up the stairs, unresisting and acquiescent. Ruric Brassoff marched on, as in a horrible dream. At the door of an office on the first-floor they knocked twice. 'Come in,' said a sharp military voice from within. Across the gulf of twenty years

Ruric Brassoff recognised it as clearly as if he had heard it yesterday. It was Alexis Selistoff's.

The soldiers turned the handle and marched in without a word. It was a comfortably-furnished office, with a Turkey carpet on the floor and a bright fire in the grate. Alexis Selistoff, calm and stern, stood up with his back to the chimney-piece. The gray moustache twitched slightly with nervousness as he looked his prisoner in the face—the fox he had hunted so long and tracked to earth at last—but no other sign of emotion was visible anywhere on those austere features. He looked the very picture of an official martinet, as he stood there, staring hard at Ruric Brassoff. But he bowed a polite bow, none the less, as he muttered calmly, 'Good-morning, Prince,' with soldier-like politeness.

And Ruric Brassoff answered in the self-same tone :

'Good-morning, Excellency.'

A lady was seated in a chair at the further end of the room. As Ruric Brassoff entered, she rose, and gazed at him full in the face. It was Olga Mireff. Once, and once only, her bosom heaved tumultuously. Neither said a word, but their eyes met: that was enough. In a moment, Ruric Brassoff knew his follower was true as steel. Her look was a look of the purest womanly devotion. But it smote him to the heart. For the eyes meant supreme faith. It repented him that he had mistrusted her—that great-hearted, single-minded, noble patriot Olga!

Alexis Selistoff was the first to break the long dramatic pause. He scanned his man close.

'You've disguised yourself wonderfully,' he said at last. 'They told me you were altered. But still, I should have known you. I should have known you anywhere. There's Brassoff in those eyes even now, and

in the firm set of that head. All the rest has changed, Prince: all the rest has turned traitor.'

'To the tyrant, not to Russia,' Ruric Brassoff answered, undaunted.

Alexis Selistoff sniffed the air.

'Give me that envelope, Nikita,' he said, turning round; and Nikita gave it him.

The General, moving forward a step, laid it down on the desk that occupied the chief place in the room.

'Undo those irons!' he went on coldly, with military brevity. And the soldier undid them. 'Leave us,' the General murmured, with an authoritative wave of the hand, as Ruric Brassoff shook himself free with a natural gesture of satisfaction at the removal of the handcuffs.

But Nikita, standing aghast, ventured one moment to remonstrate.

'His hands are free, Excellency,' he said deprecatingly. 'Would it not be well for

one other man, at least, to remain in the room to guard him ?'

Alexis Selistoff turned round with an angry shrug of impatience.

'Go when you're told, fellow!' he said haughtily, a fierce light in his eyes. 'Am I commander here, or you? Soldiers are mounting guard, I suppose, at the door as usual? And a Selistoff is match enough at any time for any man.'

At sight of the frown, Nikita and the trooper made haste to save themselves. As the door closed, Alexis Selistoff fell back into the armchair by the desk. Olga Mireff sank into another chair a little on one side, toying nervously with a flower or something else in her bosom.

Ruric Brassoff stood up, with his hands now free, facing his interrogator full front with a look of fixed pride and defiance, and separated from him by the breadth of the desk only.

General Selistoff stared at the Nihilist as one stares at some strange wild beast.

'I have a revolver in my pocket,' he said slowly. 'It's loaded and cocked. Stand there where you are, Prince. If you come a step nearer, I draw, and fire upon you.'

Madame Mireff looked mutely at her friend, and her eyes seemed to say, 'Wait your chance; caution—caution!'

The General, getting to business, glanced carelessly first at a bundle of documents found in Fomenko's rooms. They were of precisely the same character as those already seized at Ossinsky's in Kieff.

'I thought so,' he said quietly, with half a glance at the little gong that stood by his side, one touch on which would have summoned his armed guards. 'This envelope, which answers in every respect to the one we missed at Kieff, contains the assumed name and present address of my misguided brother's son, young Sergius Selistoff. We now know

what became of the one in Ossinsky's possession. You revolutionists, unhappily, will stick at nothing. When our men went to arrest him, Ossinsky seized the criminating document, chewed it up, and swallowed it.'

Ruric Brassoff smiled.

'Ossinsky was a brave man,' he said calmly, fronting his captor without a single trace of fear. 'In my failure, it consoles me, at least, to know such brave men and women as these have been closely associated with me.'

Alexis Selistoff held the envelope gingerly in his bronzed hands.

'I should have hunted this young traitor down till I found him and punished him,' he said very resolutely, 'if I had been compelled to do it. It shames me to think that one of the Selistoff blood and lineage should be mixed up in such devilry. But I know it's useless now. I see and learn from the letters sent by Stefanovic at Paris to Ossinsky at

Kieff that Sergius Selistoff the younger, unlike his father, has refused to do the traitor's dirty work. For that you have repudiated him. Then, you shall have your reward. I take him to the bosom of the family again. This envelope contains directions how and where I may find him. I will find him, and make him my heir, and bring him here to Russia to help me with his knowledge of your vile associates. He shall assist me in hunting them down. Your dupe shall turn against you, Ruric Brassoff, I tell you. I will train him to be my bloodhound.'

Ruric Brassoff looked him back in the face with unconquerable pride.

'You are wrong, Alexis Selistoff,' he said in a very soft voice. 'Your nephew Sergius would reject with shame and horror your proffered money and your hateful work. He has refused to help us, it is true; but he loves Russia well, for all that, and he loathes her tyrants. If you try to recall him, you

will get scorn for scorn. And if you publish his name, a hundred of our comrades will be up in arms at the word; they will take his life at once for his treason to our compact.'

Alexis Selistoff smiled, and broke the envelope open. He held it before him at a military distance from his face, and read out its contents slowly:

'Owen Cazalet, The Red Cottage, Moor Hill, Surrey, England.' Then he murmured to himself once or twice, 'Owen Cazalet! Owen Cazalet!'

After that, he rose from his desk and moved calmly across the room, with his soldier-like tread, to the large bureau opposite, filled with drawers and pigeon-holes. Into one drawer he thrust the letter, and relocked it securely, holding the key in his hand—a little brass key very daintily finished. Next, he walked back again, undismayed, to the seat by the desk. He sat down in it

coldly, and fixed his steely eye once more on his expected victim.

But, even while he crossed the room, Madame Mireff, on her part, had not been idle. Her chance had come: with woman's instinct she seized it. Noiseless, but quick as lightning, with a strange gleam in her eye, she rose up as the General rose, and took a step or two, unperceived, across the floor, towards Ruric Brassoff. She drew her hand from her bosom and held it out in front of her. Something bright passed hastily with a meaning glance between them. Ruric Brassoff hid the toy for a minute in the side pocket of his coat. Then, noiseless again, and quick as lightning once more, while Alexis Selistoff was still unlocking and re-locking the drawer, Olga Mireff slipped back, unperceived, to her seat. She sat down like a mouse. The whole little manœuvre, all unseen and unnoted, occupied but a second or two. For stealthiness and silence it was

catlike in its dexterity. Ruric Brassoff felt proud of his disciple's cleverness. On that soft Turkey carpet her light footfall went unheeded. When Alexis Selistoff turned again, Madame was sitting there, as motionless and as deeply interested as before, still toying with some imaginary object in her heaving bosom. Alexis Selistoff never suspected for a moment she had moved. But the pretty little revolver of the delicate workmanship lay snugly ensconced now in Ruric Brassoff's pocket.

CHAPTER L.

SENTENCE OF DEATH.

Alexis Selistoff reseated himself and looked up at his prisoner once more.

'Prince Ruric Brassoff,' he said slowly, in a very official voice, 'late Aulic Councillor, and formerly Chamberlain to her Imperial Majesty the Empress, it will not be convenient, under all the circumstances, regard being had to the unhappy misapprehensions of public feeling in Europe, that you should undergo a regular open trial. We propose, therefore, to deal with you instead by administrative order. The Czar's prerogative as fountain of justice will not in this case be delegated to judges. It will be exerted

directly. When a man of your rank offends against the law, his punishment should be exemplary. You belong to the highest Russian aristocracy, the ancestral guardians of the ancient monarchical principles of our country. Your very name marks you at once as one of those who descend in hereditary line from the time-honoured royal house of Ruric. You were educated among your peers in the College of the Pages; you were honoured by employment in the service of the Court; you were decorated with the orders of the Imperial household. Every mark of distinguished favour was showered upon your head by our august sovereign. Yet, out of pure perversity, you chose to become the leader of a vile conspiracy; you misled the people whom it was your hereditary privilege and duty to guide and direct aright. For such crimes I could wish I might have offered you a fitting requital; might have sent you to the mines for life, where you would expiate your wrong-

doing by a long, a laborious, and a squalid punishment. But you are too dangerous a person for us to risk the bare chance of your untimely escape. Stark dead is safest. I hold in my hand here a special rescript of his Most Sacred and Most Orthodox Majesty, condemning you to private military execution in a closed fortress.'

Ruric Brassoff bowed his head slightly. His conscience was satisfied.

'That arbitrary sentence,' he answered, in a voice unbroken by emotion, 'absolves me at once from all moral obligations as regards the Czar himself or his appointed ministers. It is an autocratic act—the mere despotic will of one man as against another. It is not the finding of a free court of justice, before which I have been legally tried and condemned; it is not the unanimous voice of the representatives of my country. It is a private act—man against man, open enemy against open enemy.' He raised his voice

solemnly. 'Alexis Selistoff, you have condemned me,' he said. 'Alexis Selistoff, in my turn, I condemn you.'

The words rang with a thrill through that high-roofed hall. Olga Mireff leaned forward with glowing eyes that seemed to burn like a tiger's as she watched and waited. Alexis Selistoff smiled coldly. Ruric Brassoff himself stood erect and inflexible, surveying his opponent from some paces off with indomitable pride and unconquered independence.

'You may kill me,' he continued, after a pause, in a rapt tone like a martyr's. 'The revolutionary cause, you must remember, does not depend upon individuals. A nation is at its back; it is the outcome and necessary result of an organic movement. Cut down one head of us, and twenty will spring in its place. Revolutionists are created, not by us, but by you; by your despotic action, by the general discontent it begets in the whole Russian people, by the natural, irresistible,

and organic tendency of all Russia itself towards a new and more human social system. Of this younger Russia I am the embodiment and mouthpiece, as you of the elder. I speak in the name of the people, as you of the Czar. The majesty of the many is greater and more authoritative than the majesty of the one. If you pronounce sentence on me as the spokesman of the court, I pronounce sentence on you as the spokesman of the nation. . . . And that sentence is, Alexis Selistoff'—something flashed quick in his right hand—'that you be shot dead here and now.'

He levelled the little revolver point-blank at his heart. Flash, bang, and silence. A report, a short blaze. Alexis Selistoff fell back, with a tiny brass key still grasped in his fingers, on the chair he sat in.

To Olga Mireff, looking on, what happened next, in a few seconds, was as a terrible dream for its vividness, its rapidity, its inexplicable suddenness. Before she had

time to realize that Alexis Selistoff was really dead, blood oozing and gurgling in little sobs and jets from a wound in his throat, Ruric Brassoff, that great, that glorious, that beautiful Ruric Brassoff, had snatched the little key from the dying man's hand, and in a rapid, tremulous voice had cried aloud to her, 'Quick, Olga! Quick, take it! Before they come and catch me—I daren't do it myself—there's no time—the drawer! the drawer! the third on the left. Get the paper out! Owen's name and address! Burn it! Burn it!'

He rushed to the further side of the room as he spoke, still grasping the revolver. Olga Mireff, all in a maze, but on fire with emotion, rushed hastily to the bureau, seized the letter, and burned it. Ruric Brassoff meanwhile stood with his back to the door, which he had hastily locked and bolted from within. He was only just in time. The guards, roused by the shot, were pushing hard by

this time from the other side. As the paper burned away, and crumbled to ashes, Ruric Brassoff rushed back in a tremor to the fireplace again, and let them burst in the door. 'Olga,' he cried, wringing her hand, 'you've been faithful to the end! One more thing before you die. Write to Owen Cazalet, "All safe. Every trace destroyed." Then you can do as you like. If you choose, you can follow me.'

As well as Olga could guess, the soldiers by this time had forced the door open and were rushing into the room. For a second, the sight of General Selistoff, sitting there in his chair with one hand pressed to the wound whence blood gurgled with hideous noises, struck them dumb with inaction. Then, even as they gazed, Ruric Brassoff raised the revolver once more, and pointed it with a firm hand against his own white temple. Before the foremost soldier could rush forward and prevent him, he had pulled

the trigger and let the chamber go off. There was a sob, a deep hush. He fell forward heavily. The bullet had done its work with instantaneous effect. Blood was spattered on the floor. Blood was spurting from his forehead. Some few drops fell on Olga Mireff's dress and handkerchief. She gazed at them reverently. They were the blood of a martyr.

But Ruric Brassoff lay there, not yet quite dead, very peaceful in soul, through a great haze of unconsciousness. For Owen was saved, the paper was burned, Russia was avenged, and the tyranny had come one step nearer its final destruction.

Olga Mireff flung herself down on the still breathing body. With a woman, to admire a man is also to love him. And Ruric Brassoff had seemed even greater to her in those last few minutes than ever before in his life. She seized the little revolver, before the soldiers' faces, and slipped it unobtrusively

into her dress-pocket. As she lay there, sobbing and unnerved, by the martyr's side, her first impulse was to shoot herself on Ruric Brassoff's dead body. But a solemn sense of duty prevented her from yielding as yet to that womanly impulse. To obey is better than burnt-offering: and Ruric Brassoff had said with his dying breath, 'Write to Owen Cazalet.' She must live on, now, were it only to fulfil that sacred bequest. What it all meant, she knew not; but do it she must; she would live to write to Owen Cazalet.

She repeated Ruric Brassoff's words over to herself, time after time, to remember them. But, indeed, she had no need. Every feature of that scene, every tone of that voice, was burned in as by a searing iron into the very fabric of her brain—'All safe! all safe! every trace destroyed.' It rang in her ears like the tune of a chime of bells. She heard it echoing through her head. It was a part of her being.

The soldiers removed her, wondering, and sat her down in a chair. Then they lifted Ruric Brassoff's body with unreverent hands, and laid it on the table. Alexis Selistoff's they carried out, to do it military honour. But Olga sat there still, and no man molested her.

And no man, as yet, made any inquiries for the revolver. After awhile, as in a dream, Olga Mireff rose, and walked staggering down the stairs. An officer raised his hat and spoke to her as she went out. She told him, in brief, how it had all happened, omitting only the detail of her handing the revolver to Ruric Brassoff. The officer listened in silence.

'Where is Madame stopping?' he asked, drawing out a notebook and pencil.

And Olga Mireff answered in a hard voice, as of one whose life is wholly cut from under her:

'At 24, Slav Bazar Street. I was watch-

ing there and waiting—by General Selistoff's orders—for Ruric Brassoff.'

And she had missed him, after all, when he came! She never was able to warn him!

CHAPTER LI.

AND AFTER ?

From the office, Madame Mireff stepped forth blindly into the streets of Moscow. The news of the murder had spread like wildfire. In that inflammable atmosphere, rumour flashes electric. Round the Kremlin all was confusion and strange military display. The square buzzed with Cossacks. But no man challenged her. The agent of the Czar, the unrecognised diplomatic representative of the Russian Court, the trusted friend and confidante of General Alexis Selistoff, she walked out unquestioned, erect, and trembling, through the midst of that indescribable hubbub and turmoil. Superior officers murmured to one

another as she passed, 'Madame Mireff!' and raised their caps in homage. Soldiers slunk on one side and let the great lady go by with a respectful salute. She was still free, thank Heaven! She might execute her mission yet from dead Ruric Brassoff!

Dead Ruric Brassoff! Ruric Brassoff dead! She murmured it over to herself in a dreamy, dazed tone. It seemed impossible, incredible; though she carried in her own bosom the pistol with which her martyr had taken his great life, she could hardly believe it herself even now. He seemed too grand for death. And Russia without him?

The deep fresh-fallen snow was getting trampled down by this time under the desecrating feet of men and horses. There was bustle in the streets. People came and went hurriedly. Madame Mireff called a sleigh, one of the quick little cabs that ply for hire on runners, and, scarcely knowing what she did, bade the man drive—faster, faster, to

the Frenchified Hôtel de l'Impératrice, in the modern quarter, where her maid was stopping. Her own boxes were there, and her private belongings; for she had occupied the room in the Rue du Bazar Slave as a place to look out for Ruric Brassoff only. Of course, she couldn't return to that hateful house in such a crisis as this. The police were in possession of Fomenko's rooms, and would be busily engaged by now in ransacking everything.

Tinkle-tinkle went the bells in the keen crisp air, as the sleigh hurried along—faster, faster, faster—over the smooth virgin snow toward the modern quarter. But Madame Mireff's thoughts were very different from their tone. She was reflecting how she came to miss Ruric Brassoff.

It was a horrible mischance, yet unavoidable, wholly. For three weeks she had occupied a room on the ground-floor of the house where Fomenko lodged, nominally to

act as a spy for the Government on Ruric Brassoff's arrival; really, to warn her Chief when he came against impending danger. Of Fomenko himself she knew nothing—not even his name. She had only been told by Alexis Selistoff to watch that house, as Ruric Brassoff was likely to come there on his arrival in Moscow; and in her anxiety to save the great leader's life, she didn't care to risk discovery of her complicity in the plot by making too minute inquiries about the possible subordinate he might be expected to visit. But on the very morning of Ruric Brassoff's arrest she had left her front room for a few minutes only when he presented himself at the door; and she knew nothing of his arrest till, half an hour later, as she gazed out of the window, still on the look-out for her Chief, she saw the man himself hustled into a sleigh between two brutal soldiers, a prisoner for his life, with his arms tied behind him. Then she hurried away breathless to

the Kremlin, all on fire, to await Alexis Selistoff's arrival from St. Petersburg, and to ask leave to be present at his interview with the arch-conspirator.

These things Olga Mireff turned over with bewilderment in her own whirling brain as the sleigh hurried her on over the yielding snow through the streets of Moscow.

At her hotel it drew up short. The *dvornik* came out and received her courteously. A very great lady, Olga Mireff, in Russia; a close friend of the Czar's and of Alexis Selistoff's. Had she heard the news of the General's death? Olga Mireff started. Why, it was there before her! Yes, yes—impatiently—she had heard it, of course; was there herself at the time; would be a witness at the inquiry; had seen and recognised Prince Ruric Brassoff. The *dvornik* bowed low, but turned pale at the same time.

'Is Prince Brassoff dead, too, then?' he asked, with a tremor in his voice.

In a second, with feminine instinct, Olga Mireff turned on him. She had caught at the profound undercurrent of hidden sympathy and interest in the man's words and tone.

'Why, are you of ours?' she asked low, in a ferment of surprise, giving a Nihilist password.

The man started and stared.

'And you?' he asked, half terrified.

Olga Mireff pointed with pride to the spots of red blood on her skirt and bodice.

'Ruric Brassoff's,' she said hurriedly. 'I gave him the pistol to shoot with. It's here, in my bosom. I was one with the martyr. See here, I can trust you. I need your aid. It was I who helped him to kill the creature Selistoff. He gave me a dying commission to carry out. When it's done, with that same pistol, I, too, shall free myself from this hateful despotism. Come to my room, *dvornik*, in ten minutes from now. I shall want you to post a letter for me at once—

what an honour for you, my friend!—a letter enjoined upon me by Ruric Brassoff.'

The *dvornik* bowed once more, this time with profound reverence. His lips were ashy.

'If you are a friend of Ruric Brassoff's,' he said, kissing the hem of her robe, as Russians kiss the holy relics of saints and martyrs, 'you can command my services. I never knew till now you were one of the circle.'

Olga Mireff looked hard at him.

'This is a mask,' she said in a very low voice, touching her cheek as she spoke—'this that I wear before the outer world. The other that I showed you just now is my face. And my face is sacred. Ruric Brassoff has kissed it.'

She went up to her own room, and sat down hurriedly to write. It was in terrible suspense, for at any moment now the police might break in to interrogate her. But she

must send the letter Ruric Brassoff had enjoined. Not direct, though, not direct; that would be far too dangerous. In a very few words she wrote to her cousin Tania at Charlottenburg, near Berlin, asking her as a last favour to herself and Ruric Brassoff to forward a letter, enclosed, to Owen Cazalet, The Red Cottage, Moor Hill, Surrey, England. Then the letter itself she wrote, too; it was short and to the point:

'Dear Owen,

'I write in haste and fear from Moscow. Mr. Hayward is dead; you will doubtless have guessed from the papers before this reaches you that he and Ruric Brassoff are one and the same person. No one else on earth now knows that truth. Let no one else know it. Our dear and honoured friend was arrested in Moscow last night, and brought this morning before your uncle, Alexis Selistoff. I was present at the inter-

view in the rooms of the Third Section. I supplied him with the revolver to do the deed. You will know already he shot General Selistoff dead, and then, satisfied with that act of justice on a cruel criminal, blew his own brains out. His sacred blood was scattered upon my dress. I would have killed myself then and there with the self-same pistol, but that he commissioned me to write these last few lines to you. His own words were these: "Tell Owen, all safe; every trace destroyed." His dying thoughts were for you. What it meant exactly it is not for me to inquire; Ruric Brassoff so willed it. But after he shot Alexis Selistoff, and before he put the pistol to his own martyred head, while the soldiers were forcing their way into the room in disorder, he caused me to burn a slip of paper with your English name and address, which Alexis Selistoff had recovered yesterday from a man named Fomenko, arrested at the same time with our

revered Ruric Brassoff. No one else had seen it. I send this out now by a trusty messenger. When he returns, I shall follow our beloved leader. Life without him has no charm for me now. For I loved him, Owen —I loved him.

'Yours and Russia's,

'OLGA MIREFF.'

She had scarcely finished this hasty note, when the *dvornik* knocked at the door. His face was white, but his mien was resolute.

'Is the letter ready?' he asked, in a mysterious tone.

'Yes, ready, friend, quite ready,' Madame Mireff answered. 'Take it out and post it.'

And at the same time she offered him twenty roubles.

The *dvornik* shook his head with a pained expression.

'No, no, 'tis for Russia and the Cause,'

he said quickly. 'I can accept nothing for that. . . . But there's one thing I should like, if I dared to ask it.'

'What is it?' Olga Mireff asked, wondering.

'A spot of Ruric Brassoff's sacred blood,' the man answered earnestly.

Tears stood in Olga Mireff's eyes. She seized a pair of scissors on the table close by. The handsome morning robe she wore was spattered all over with little crimson blood-spots. She cut one circular patch out from the bodice, just above her own heart, with a round spot in its midst, and handed it to the man. He kissed it reverently. Then he folded it in a purse, and placed it next his heart.

Olga gazed at him with a strange feeling of fraternal regard. In the near presence of death all men are brothers, and at moments of supreme passion it is woman's native instinct to let her womanly emotions have

free play without restraint or regard of persons. He was a common, stalwart, bearded Russian peasant; she was a high-born lady, delicately bred, daintily nurtured. He was tanned by the sun and scarred by the frosts of winter; she was white as the newly-fallen snow on the fields by the Oka. But she gazed at him for a moment as he bent, all reverence, over that strange relic of the martyr they both loved and honoured. Then she leant forward, unabashed.

'Ruric Brassoff kissed these lips,' she said in a very clear voice. 'I pass you on the kiss, in token of brotherhood.'

The *dvornik* accepted it with a certain stately acquiescence.

'For Russia,' he said simply.

And Olga Mireff answered in the same tone:

'For Russia.'

Ten minutes later he came back, pleased, proud, and smiling. Olga sat in a chair,

listlessly toying with the beautiful, deadly revolver.

'I have posted it,' the man said.

'Unobserved ?'

'Yes, unobserved, dear sister.'

'That's well,' Olga Mireff answered, without a tremor in her voice. 'Now go, that I may kill myself in quiet as he did.'

The man nodded his assent, and glided noiselessly from the room. There was a short interval of silence as he descended the stairs. Then a shot above was heard clearly ringing through the *dvornik's* lodge.

This time the prudent porter took two men up with him to search the apartment. On the rug by the fireplace, Olga Mireff lay dying, with her mouth full of blood. Ruric Brassoff's fresh bloodstains were pressed to her lips by her left hand; her right grasped a revolver, very small and finished. The large eyes still stood open. They gazed towards the table. By its edge was a photo-

graph of Ruric Brassoff, taken twenty years before. It was half obliterated in places by frequent kissing.

'You can keep it,' she said to the *dvornik*, through a ghastly gurgle of blood. 'And the revolver, too, that Ruric Brassoff shot himself with.'

CHAPTER LII.

AWAY OVER IN ENGLAND.

It was a clear March day in London—a rare day for the time of the year; bright, mild, and springlike. The breeze blew fresh; the sun shone merrily. Fleecy clouds floated high overhead against a deep-blue background. For though the calendar said March, the day seemed April. Ionê, like a gleam of English spring herself, had been shopping in Regent Street, and meant to call on her way home at Owen's new office in Mr. Hayward's building. So she tripped along the wrong side of the street, that brilliant busy afternoon, as blithe as though Czars and Nihilists were not. To Ionê,

indeed, in her irrepressible youth and strength and health and beauty, on such a day as this, the mere physical joy of living overbore every other earthly consideration.

She was too buoyant to grieve over long. Neither poor Blackbird's sad death, which she felt deeply at the time, nor her own engagement delayed, nor the impending terror above Owen's head, could wholly cloud or darken that glad Greek nature—especially when all the world around was steeped in sunshine, and a brisk south-west wind was blowing free over the land, laden warm with soft moisture from the joyous Atlantic. It blew Ionê's chestnut hair mischievously about her translucent ears, and played strange tricks at times with the wayward skirt of her simple little walking-dress.

Ionê had been in pursuit of spring frocks, and was in very good spirits; for though it pleased her to live for pure love of it in Sacha's servantless phalanstery, she was

amply provided with this world's goods by her father's will, and to-day she had been spending her money freely, as a woman loves to spend it, on her personal adornment. The joy of living had been reinforced for the moment by the joy of purchasing. Her light step rebounded from the dead flags of Regent Street almost as elastically as from the springy turf of the chalk downs at Moor Hill. A painter who chanced to pass turned round as she went by to watch her go; with that eager young face, those laughing eyes, that graceful ease of motion, what a model, he thought, she would have made for the merriest of the Oreads! And, oh! indiscreet south-west wind, even as he looked and admired, what passing glimpses you revealed of twinkling feet and ankles that the Oread herself might well have envied!

On a sudden, at the corner, as she danced along lightly, with her eye for the most part intent on the hats and bonnets, a poster

caught her glance, laid flat on the ground with flaring big letters. 'Nihilist Outrage in Moscow,' it said, in all the startling emphasis of its very largest type. 'Murder of General Selistoff by Prince Ruric Brassoff. Suicide of the Prince. Death of Madame Mireff.'

The last name alone must certainly have riveted Ioné's attention, even without the others; but it was with a quick flush of excitement that she read the first words as well; for though she knew nothing positive as yet as to Mr. Hayward's past, she felt sure at that moment it must be he, and no other, who had committed this final act of deadly vengeance on the oppressors of his Fatherland. And she trembled with indignation, already, at the bare words, 'Nihilist Outrage.' How dare they — the cowards! He was Owen's friend, and hers. Dear, dear Mr. Hayward! Who should venture to confound such an act as his with mere vulgar and commonplace self-seeking murder?

She bought the paper hurriedly, giving the boy a shilling, and never waiting for her change in the excitement of the moment. Then, just round the corner, she tore it open with feverish fingers and read the Moscow telegram. It was short but decisive. She knew what it meant instinctively.

'Early this morning, a Nihilist prisoner, arrested yesterday in the Rue du Bazar Slave, and confidently identified with Prince Ruric Brassoff, the famous revolutionary agitator and exile, was brought up for examination at the tribunal of political police before General Alexis Selistoff, Chief of the Third Section. What happened during the interview is not yet thoroughly understood, as only Madame Mireff, the Russian lady so well known in London society, was present in the room with the two principals. The police are also very reticent. It has transpired, however, that, after a short but stormy colloquy, the accused managed to possess himself of a loaded

revolver, which he may perhaps have concealed about his own person, and fired on General Selistoff, whom he wounded fatally. The General fell dead in his chair at the first shot. The door was then forced by the sentries on guard, who were just in time to see Prince Ruric Brassoff hold the revolver to his own head and blow his brains out. An envelope, supposed to contain a critical statement as to the Nihilist conspiracy, which the police had secured, and to which both General Selistoff and his assailant attached the greatest importance, is reported missing. The murderer's body is said to be horribly disfigured. Great consternation prevails everywhere in Moscow, and the Grand-Duke Sergius, Governor of the city, has issued at once a written proclamation putting the town and *banlieue* in a state of siege till further notice.

'*Later.*—Madame Olga Mireff, who alone was an eye-witness of the deadly fracas

between General Alexis Selistoff and his murderer, Prince Brassoff, has committed suicide in her apartments at the Hôtel de l'Impératrice with the same pistol which was used in the affair of the Third Section. The whole incident is thus wrapped in the profoundest mystery. It is now generally surmised that Madame Mireff herself, though an intimate friend of the Imperial Family, may in secret have been affiliated to the Nihilist conspiracy, and it is even suggested that she supplied Brassoff with the fatal revolver. Otherwise her suicide remains wholly inexplicable. Numerous arrests have been made in the quarter of the sectaries. Trade and communications are entirely paralyzed.'

With the paper grasped tight in her trembling fingers, Ione rushed round, all on fire, to Owen's office. She had no doubt as to the truth in her own mind now. Mr. Hayward was dead; but he had died nobly fighting; and he had protected Owen to the

last—for the envelope was missing. Murderer indeed! Murderer! The lie! The insult! Dare they speak so of the dead? Ionê's face burned red at it.

She reached the shop, quivering hot with shame and indignation. As she entered, she thrust the paper into Owen's hands. He read it, and sank into a chair, as pale as death.

'And I brought this on him!' he cried, wringing his hands in his agony. 'Ionê, Ionê, it was for me he did it!'

'No, no!' Ionê cried hotly. 'He brought it upon himself. You were only the occasion, not in any sense the cause. He did what was just. And his life hasn't gone for nothing, either. He has died a martyr. It was the end he would have wished. In Russia—at Moscow—by his father's home—waging open war against the tools of the tyranny!'

Two days later Madame Mireff's letter arrived. It bore the Berlin post-mark. Owen read it with Ionê in breathless silence. When

he had finished, the strong man clasped his hands like a child, and cried aloud and bitterly over that simple narrative. He had lost a father. But for Ionê, it was natural she should think most of Owen's safety. Her heart came up into her mouth with sudden joy at those words, 'No one else had seen it.' Then, Owen was free at last! No living soul on earth save themselves and Sacha now knew the secret of his true name and ancestry.

She said nothing at the time. She only held Owen's hand clasped tight in hers, and smoothed it tenderly. But that evening, as they sat alone in the drawing-room at the flat —Trevor and Sacha had left them together for half an hour on purpose—she looked at Owen suddenly, and, obeying a natural impulse, fell on his neck at once with a great flood of joyous tears.

'My darling,' she said simply, 'I can't bear to say it while you're so sad and

troubled. 'And I'd learnt to love him, too. He was so kind, so fatherly. But, Owen, I can't help it; it's such a relief to me to know you've nothing more to fear. I'm glad it's all over. The strain was so terrible.'

Owen pressed her to his heart, and smoothed her hair with his hand.

'For your sake, darling,' he said, 'I'm glad of it, too—I'm glad of it.'

Ionê laid her head, nestling, upon his shoulder, and sobbed.

'And now, darling,' she went on, in a very timid voice, 'there's no reason on earth——' She paused and trembled.

'No reason on earth why we two, who love one another so well, shouldn't henceforth be one. No, Ionê, no reason.' He kissed her forehead tenderly. 'As soon as you will, dearest.'

THE END.

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